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Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Department of Psychology

A COMPREHENSIVE INVESTIGATION OF VARIABLES RELATED TO  
CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTIONS

By Renee Payton Cahill

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

Doctor of Psychology

June 2010

**PHILADELPHIA COLLEGE OF OSTEOPATHIC MEDICINE  
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**Dissertation Approval**

This is to certify that the thesis presented to us by Renee Payton Cahill on the 28<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2010, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology, has been examined and is acceptable in both scholarship and literary quality.

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Growing up with a learning disability was very hard. My commitment to this project was sparked by a desire to increase awareness pertaining to children's self-esteem, especially for those struggling academically.

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## **Abstract**

In recent decades much has been revealed regarding children's self-perceptions and sense of worth. Children engage in social comparisons to gauge their strengths and weaknesses relative to those around them. Thus one's environment plays a critical role impacting one's perceptions of self. Other variables suggested as contributing to children's formulation of self-worth, include academic achievement, perception of victimization by peers, and academic placement. However, findings have been inconsistent in regard to the extent to which these variables relate to self-worth. The present study sought to discern if these variables relate to children's self-perceptions. Results revealed a positive correlation between students' scholastic competence, self-perception scores and cognitive skills and academic achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics. Findings also suggest that the children's self-perceptions and sense of worth were significantly different, depending upon their academic group. Moreover, children in Learning Support demonstrated more pervasive negative self-perceptions across non-academic domains of competence, whereas the opposite effect was not evident for students in the gifted program. A significant, negative relationship was revealed between each domain of self-perception and perceptions of victimization. In addition, children in Learning Support perceive themselves to be more frequently victimized by their peers than students in either Regular Education or in Gifted Support. Educational implications, recommendations for future research, and study limitations are discussed.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Statement of the Problem**

In recent decades, children's perception of self-worth has been a topic of interest in developmental psychology and educational research. Research surrounding self-esteem in childhood has revealed a relationship between self-perceptions and academic performance (Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978; Stringer & Heath, 2008). Additionally, self-perceptions have been suggested to play a mediating role between motivation and academic performance (Ames, 1978; Dweck, 1986; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Chapman, 1988a). However, there have been inconsistencies and debates regarding many variables related to children's self-perceptions and sense of worth. Inconsistent findings are especially prolific in regard to the extent that academic placement impacts children's self-worth, particularly relative to Learning Support placement for children with learning disabilities (Weiner & Tardif, 2004; Rollins, 2007; Cooney, Jahoda, Knott, 2006; Renick & Harter, 1989) and Gifted Support programs (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, Roche, 1995; Kulik & Kulik, 1991).

In the school environment, where academic success is paramount, children are evaluated by their peers, based on their scholastic success. Those struggling academically fall victim to negative feedback from their peers and are less socially accepted (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). The feedback that children receive from their peers may become internalized and increase their negative self-perceptions, thereby impeding their academic success (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). Although research has found a relationship between children's self-perceptions and peer victimization (Klima and Repetti, 2008; Neary & Joseph, 1994), further research is needed to better

understand the extent to which academic performance, victimization, and self-perceptions are intertwined.

Recognizing variables related to children's self-perceptions will enable better identification of students at risk for poor self-perceptions and will provide areas of suggested interventions. Providing interventions may enhance children's self-perceptions, motivations and academic performances, thereby enabling children to achieve their academic potential.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The present study examined the relationship between children's self-perceptions and self-worth and investigated how they are related to four variables of interest: academic achievement, cognitive ability, academic placement, and perceived victimization by peers. According to the principles of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), children evaluate their worth based on their performances in comparison with those around them. However, children's comparison groups are dictated by their educational placements. Within the elementary school setting, children are often grouped according to their academic achievements into one of three sub-groups, which include Gifted Support, Learning Support, and Regular Education (no remedial services). The present study sought to investigate the relationship between children's self-perceptions and academic placement.

This study explored the extent to which perceived peer victimization relates to children's self-perceptions and academic placement. The relationship between being bullied and negative self-perception have been well documented (Klima and Repetti, 2008); however, it was unclear how such victimization correlates with children's

academic performance and global sense of worth. In a society in which academic performance and social acceptance are paramount, these two domains of self-perception were hypothesized to relate strongly to children's global self-worth. Moreover, children with learning disabilities are not only at undue risk for academic hardship, but also are more likely to experience peer victimization (Luciano, & Savage, 2007). Thus it was suspected that this group will reveal the lowest self-perceptions and will be the most frequently victimized. However, gifted children, who are among the most academically successful, were suspected to reveal the highest self-perceptions when compared with peers.

Research suggests that by age 8, children develop internalized self-representations (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loeb, 1980), thus their self-perceptions were expected to remain stable from year to year despite changes within their peer reference group. The present study explored the consistency of children's self-perceptions to determine the extent to which their beliefs are internalized and remain stable between two academic years. The results of this study provided further insight into variables related to children's self-perceptions.

### **Overview of Literature Review**

An extensive literature review highlights the developmental progression of children's self-perceptions. Throughout the literature, some researchers delineate the differences between the definitions of self-esteem, self-perception, and self-concept, yet others use these terms synonymously. However, self-concept and self-perception refer to one's cognitive understanding or evaluations and judgments about one's abilities (Cosden, Elliott, Nobel, & Keleman, 1999), whereas self-esteem denotes one's overall

sense of worth or sense of well-being. Thus the terms self-esteem and self-worth are synonymous. It is important to note that the relationship between one's thoughts about one's self and overall sense of worth are reciprocally related, thus at times, may appear interchangeable depending upon the context.

Young children lack the ability to formulate accurate self-perceptions (Marsh, Craven & Debus, 1991). However, as children enter their school years, they begin to engage in social comparisons (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). By comparing themselves with their peers, children foster a sense of individual strengths and weaknesses, which is utilized to foster a sense of worth (Harter, 2006). As children age, their self-perceptions become more differentiated and multidimensional (Harter, 2006). Most children, 8 and older, conceptualize themselves across several domains, which include attractiveness, scholastic ability, social status, behavioral conduct, and athleticism (Harter, 1985). Children's competence or ranking in the domains to which they ascribe the greatest value has the most pronounced impact on their global self-worth (Harter, 2006).

There is a discussion about research pertaining to how social comparisons foster children's self-perceptions. Social comparison theory has been applied to children across varying academic placements, especially for children with learning disabilities receiving either inclusion services or pull-out support (Weiner & Tardif, 2004; Rollins, 2007; Cooney, Jahoda, Knott, 2006; Renick & Harter, 1989). The literature pertaining to the impact of academic placement for children with learning disabilities is also discussed. Additionally, one aspect of social comparisons, coined the "big fish-little pond effect" is described as it pertains to gifted children receiving enrichment services.

Moreover, ample research has investigated the influential variables that children with learning disabilities may experience; these present either as buffers or as risk factors, impacting their self-worth. Aside from academic placement, other relevant factors pertinent to children's self-perceptions include: the weight that the child places on academic success (Harter, Whitesell, Junkin, 1998; Cosden, Elliott, Noble, Kelemen, 1999), possession of an internal versus external locus of control (Hagborg, 1996), and the extent that a child experiences stigmatization and/ or social acceptance (Juvonen & Bear, 1992; Wiener & Schneider, 2002; Vaughn, Haager, Hogan & Kouzekanani, 1992; Sage & Kindermann, 1999). Each of these factors contributes to how children with learning disabilities develop their perceptions of self. These factors are all discussed in detail.

In addition to peer acceptance playing a critical role impacting children's self-worth (Klima & Repetti, 2008), research suggests that victimization from peers is directly related to decreased self-worth (Neary & Joseph, 1994). Other research discussing how peer acceptance and academic performance are related is discussed. Also, how one's self-worth is related to locus of control, self-efficacy, and future academic performance is explored. Last, research findings pertaining to children's gender, ethnicity, and age, as related to their perceptions of self is reviewed.

### **Relevance to Cognitive Behavior Therapy**

Children's self-perceptions are a direct result of their beliefs about themselves in comparison with their peers (Harter, 2006). Children who struggle academically and experience victimization may be more likely to develop negative self-perceptions as a result of these experiences. Children with poor self-perceptions are characterized as having more negative feelings regarding their abilities, which may result in a lower self-

esteem, learned helplessness, and poor self-efficacy (Pastorelli et al., 2001). This phenomenon may be especially pronounced for children who are diagnosed with learning disabilities. Moreover, children with negative academic self-perceptions may underestimate their academic potential. Negative self-perceptions are associated with poor motivation (Bandura, 1977; 1978), which places these children at increased risk for academic failure.

In addition, understanding the relationship between peer victimization, academic performance, and academic placement related to self-perception is critical to improve academic performance for children at risk for poor self-perceptions and self-worth. Unraveling the variables impacting children's self-perceptions will lead to better identification, thereby enabling interventions to be implemented for children possessing negative beliefs. Improving children's negative self-perceptions will likely increase their motivation and academic success, thereby enabling them to achieve their fullest academic potential.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

### **The Development of Self-esteem or Self-worth**

The first theories proposed to untangle the components of an individual's self-esteem, also coined self-worth, stem from the works of William James (1880, 1892) and Charles Horton Cooley (1902). James (1880, 1892) presented a model for the development of an individual's self-worth as a process of evaluating his or her successes and failures in areas he or she deems most important. For example, if an individual regards intellect as important, but places little value on physical athleticism, and if that person is academically successful, but is not athletically so, he or she will have a healthy self-esteem. Whereas, if a person with the same value has poor academic achievement, but is very athletic, he or she will have poor self-esteem. James (1880, 1892) attributes the development of poor self-worth as resulting from a discrepancy between one's ideal self, compared with one's real self.

Cooley (1902) proposed a different theory about what determines a person's self-esteem called the 'looking-glass-self.' According to his theory, people reflect the opinions and evaluation of those closest to them as a mirror that determines their self-worth (Harter, 2006). Thus, if an individual is routinely praised for success and receives positive feedback from those around him, his or her supportive environment will foster a positive self-esteem. On the other hand, a person who routinely is told to do better and be better, and he or she has failed to do so, that person will have a poor self-esteem (Harter, 2006).

Initially James's (1880, 1892) and Cooley's (1902) theories received little attention, because the emphasis in psychology at the time leaned towards the behaviorism

perspective (Harter, 2006). Cognitions and self-evaluation were not well-regarded because only observable events were considered worthy of exploration at the time (Harter, 1990, 2006). During the behaviorist movement, understanding and interventions were primarily based upon observable behavioral events. Interventions consisted of improving skills and implementing reinforcement systems to elicit positive behaviors and minimize maladaptive ones. However, a paradigm shift occurred around the middle of the century, as developmental psychology and the cognitive revolution surfaced (Harter, 2006). At that time, the focus of intervention began to encompass the work of Martin Seligman (1975) and Albert Bandura (1978), emphasizing the role of motivation's impact on performance. Based on the work of Bandura (1977), aspects of one's self became recognized as a mediator for behaviors (Harter, 1982, 1990). Self-representations gained credence as behaviorist recognized the powerful properties that self-evaluative statements played, impacting both the clients' treatments and pathologies (Harter, 2006). As one's cognitions and beliefs gained gravity, attention steered toward understanding the development of one's self-esteem and understanding how one's beliefs relates to their affect.

Affect became an increasingly important construct following the cognitive revolution, and interventions thereafter attempted to reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms (Harter, 1990). Attention shifted to the role of self-representation, which gives weight to aspects such as self-esteem and self-efficacy related to functioning and performance. Today's most prominent theory of self-esteem development combines the tenets of James (1880, 1892) and Cooley (1902) (Harter, 1990, 1999, 2006). Harter's



(1990) model goes one step further by highlighting the factors influencing self-representations and delineating the development of self-esteem across the lifespan.

### **Multidimensional Theory of Self-concept**

As children age, their perceptions of themselves shift from physical characteristics to their behavioral skills and actions (Harter, 1988b). Young children's sense of identity is based primarily on physical characteristics such as, size, weight, gender, and appearance (Harter, 1988b). As children's skills emerge in a step-wise fashion (Fischer, 1980), they tend to assess themselves in concrete terms, based on their competence in these areas (Harter, 2006). Although young children are concretely aware of many of their competencies and inadequacies, such as, "I can count"; "I have a lot of friends"; "I can't read that", young children tend not to be negatively impacted by their deficits because they are less inclined to internalize their failures (Harter, 2006).

Children's cognitive development increases in complexity as they age (Fischer, 1980) and they develop more accurate self-representations. However, according to Harter (1999, 2006), children younger than 7-years-old lack the cognitive ability to construct mental representations of themselves. The change in one's ability to engage in more meaningful and complex self-evaluation is reflected in the developmental cognitive advances outlined by Piaget (1963). Young children conceptualize themselves, based on what they can do, which Piaget (1963) describes as the preoperational stage. At around age 8, children enter the concrete operations stage during which they begin to conceptualize themselves with trait-like characteristics such as, being attractive, intelligent, or funny.

Harter (1990, 1999, 2006) suggests that children develop, at about age 8, a conceptualization of self-worth, which persists through adulthood. As children's cognitive abilities expand, their self-evaluations become more clearly defined, based upon their feelings, motivations, and cognitions about their physical characteristics and competencies (Harter, 1988b). Harter (1982) proposes that the children's self-perceptions become increasingly distinct and domain-specific rather than consisting of an overall, unidimensional self-appraisal as suggested by Coppersmith (1967). Harter's (1982) first appraisal of children's self-perceptions indicated that children perceive themselves across multiple domains, including: cognitive competence, social acceptance, physical competence, and overall or global self-worth. Further supporting Harter's (1982) theory regarding a multidimensional self-concept as opposed to a single domain, Byrne and Schneider's (1988) factor analysis results supported several discrete domains divergent from one another and from global self-esteem.

Later, Harter (1985) suggests that as children approach age 8 until about age 14, they tend to evaluate themselves across five major domains which include: social acceptance, scholastic competence, behavioral conduct, physical appearance, and athletic competence. Harter's (1985) measure, developed to assess these domains as well as to assess global self-worth, is called the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC). The SPPC factor analysis revealed that these six domains are a valid and reliable measure of children's self-worth for children 8 through 14 (Harter, 1985). Subsequent research, utilizing the SPPC, supports the notion of independent domains exclusive of overall self-worth (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1990) and a multidimensional perspective of self-concept (Marsh & Gouvenet, 1989). Both Harter (1982) and Byrne and Schneider (1988) found

that as children aged, their self-evaluations became progressively more highly differentiated.

However, recent debate has emerged regarding the age during which children develop a multidimensional concept of their self-worth. Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, and Loeb (1980) suggest that children demonstrate the emergence of self-worth between the ages of 3 to 7. Additionally, Marsh, Caven, and Debus (1991) suggest that the research discounting young children's multidimensional self-concept stems from insufficient instrumentation. Research has shown that by the time they enter kindergarten, most children can differentiate their competencies across large domains such as, physical appearance, reading competence, math skills, and peer relationships (Marsh, Craven & Debus, 1991). In response to this theory, Van den Bergh and De Rycke (2003) administered the SPPC to children ranging from 6 to 8 years old and found consistency among children within this age range, suggesting that children may develop a multidimensional self-concept at an age younger than previously thought. Additionally, children's ability to view their skills across varying domains was observed in first graders who could distinguish specific competencies between several academic areas (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993).

As individuals approach adolescence, they enter the formal operations stage, which is characterized by the ability to engage in high-order thinking (Piaget, 1963). With this cognitive advancement, adolescents are able to formulate deeper self-descriptions (Harter, 1990). They are also at risk for greater clarity in recognizing the discrepancy between their real and ideal selves, which can damage their self-esteem (Harter, 1990). With the cognitive advancements in adolescence comes the ability to

differentiate between even more domains of self-perception. Harter's (1988a) *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* includes: romantic appeal, peer likeability, job competence, and general cognitive competence domains in addition to the 6 domains in the children's version: scholastic competence, athletic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and global self-worth. As individuals reach adulthood and enter the workforce, 11 distinct domains have been recognized; these include: adequacy as a provider, household management, nurturance, intimate relationships, physical appearance, sociability, morality, sense of humor, athletic competence, job competence, and intelligence (Harter, 1990).

### **Factors Influencing Global Self-worth**

Throughout one's lifespan, beginning in mid-childhood, individuals rely on those around them as reflections of their worth (Harter, 1990, 1999, 2006). Additionally, during mid-childhood, children's cognitive processes significantly expand while their social interactions flourish, both factors impacting their self-perceptions (Harter, 2006). Their self-perceptions pave the way for their global sense of worth or self-esteem (Harter, 2006). Harter's (2006) research supported Cooley's (1902) premise and found that approval and support from others was influential in the development of one's self-reported self-esteem.

Younger children tend to perceive themselves as more competent in most domains than do older children; the exception to this is the area of sports. (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993). Most young children portray robust self-esteem during their early years (Harter, 2006). Harter and Pike (1984) concluded that young children are buffered from adverse self-evaluations for several reasons. First, they tend

to perceive themselves predominantly in a positive light because of their overall advancements and developmental gains over a relatively short period of time. What young children cannot achieve one day, they may master the next; thus, they are frequently reminded and validated by their expanding skills. Second, they tend to elicit very positive and supportive feedback from their environment. Initially, young children's primary source of feedback about their self-worth comes from their parents, who are usually encouraging, supportive, and overwhelmingly positive (Harter, 2006). Third, children younger than 8, tend to lack the cognitive capacity to engage in social comparisons, which can hinder one's self-concept (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebel, 1980; Harter, 2006). Thus, most young children have a healthy self-esteem and their self-worth is protected during these formative years. However, the few youngsters with poor self-evaluations are easily recognized by their teachers as children who demonstrate certain externalized behaviors such as a lack of curiosity, a lack of pride in their work, and a lack of independence and initiative (Harter, 2006).

Harter (1999, 2006) hypothesizes that one risk factor for the decline in older children's self-esteem is due to parents' increasing expectations of their children's competence, resulting in the parents' withholding of unconditional approval. Because of the social pressure of having academically successful children, parents raise their expectations, typically as their children enter second grade. Upon the emergence of literacy, children start acquiring knowledge rather than skills. Prior research found athletic competence, physical appearance, and likeability more predictive of peers' support (Harter, 2006). However, behavioral conduct and scholastic competence were more predictive of parental support (Harter, 2006). Thus, parents and educational

systems raise the bar for what is expected of these youngsters, causing children to view themselves more critically, which can hinder their self-perceptions.

At about age 8, children begin to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in comparison with those of their peers (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). Through social comparisons, children become aware of their ranking among their peers. James' (1890,1892) theory also comes into play for this age group because they ascertain their own worth, depending on which domains they weight as most important and how they compare with their peers in those domains (Harter, 2006).

However, research has been inconclusive regarding which domains are most strongly correlated with global self-worth. Harter's (1982) findings revealed stronger correlations for children's physical and social acceptance related to their global self-worth; whereas Byrne and Schneider's (1988) findings indicated that children's social acceptance and cognitive domains were more strongly related to overall self-worth. More recent research suggests that one's global sense of worth is based upon one's perceived level of family support, appearance, competition, perception of God's love, academic and behavioral success in school, and peer approval (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). However, Crocker and Wolfe (2001) agree that each domain's relationship to self-worth differs, based on the individual's significance ascribe to each domain.

As children enter junior high or middle school, they tend to demonstrate declines in their self-worth (Harter, 1990). This was especially true with respect to physical appearance and behavioral conduct (Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999). These declines have been associated with the changes they experience cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally (Leahy & Shirk, 1985).

**Construct Validity of Self-perceptions**

As proposed by Harter and others, individuals' self-concepts consist of discrete domains. Marsh and Parker (1984) explored the construct validity of academic self-concept by comparing students' ratings of academic self-concepts against their teachers' ratings of the students' academic self-concepts, and students' tests of academic abilities, compared with their teachers' rating of the students' academic abilities. Both students' and teachers' ratings were significantly correlated with children's academic self-concept, whereas non-academic domains of self-concept were unrelated, thus indicating a clear distinction in individual academic self-perception which is exclusive of other non-academic areas. Marsh (1987) found further support for the distinction between academic self-concept and global esteem, in which student's GPA was significantly correlated with academic self-concept and only modestly related to global self-worth.

Champman and Tunmer (1995) investigated children's developmental academic self-perceptions across domains and found that children's perceptions do vary when subcomponents of academic skill are investigated. Champman and Tunmer's (1995) study explored how subcomponents of children's self-perceptions regarding their reading ability changed throughout their elementary school years. Children's reading self-concept was divided into beliefs about their ability to read well, perception of reading as difficult or challenging for them, self-perception of the degree of importance they place on reading skills, and their feelings about reading (Champman & Tunmer, 1995). Findings suggest that although children's perceptions regarding their reading competence and degree of difficulty remained consistent throughout elementary school, their feelings about reading were generally positive throughout their first three years of school;

however, by third grade their attitudes towards reading declined. Thus, children's self-concept regarding their competence appears more differentiated than global, even within the academic competency domain (Champman & Tunmer, 1995).

### **State or Trait-Based Self-Perception and Contingencies of Self-worth**

Research has revealed inconsistent findings with regard to the stability of children's self-perceptions. Despite some reports of relative declines in self-perception during adolescence (Harter, 1990, 1999, 2006), other studies have found that children's perceptions regarding their skills and academic competence remain stable between pre-school to second grade and from third grade through ninth grade (Harter & Pike, 1984).

Moreover, with the emergence of formal operations, individuals' perceptions about themselves can change, depending on the environment (Harter, 1990). Riddle (1985) found support for James' (1880, 1892) theory in that if individuals continue to value the same domains over time and demonstrate consistency in that area, they will portray stability in their self-esteem over time; whereas, changes in one's perceived success in a domain of value will result in fluctuations to one's self-esteem. However, individuals differ with respect to how much or how little the environment influences their self-perceptions. Some individuals' self-perceptions are based on external factors, such as the attitudes of people around them, whereas others rely on internal factors, such as how much effort or motivation they expend (Harter, 1990). Thus, for some, self-esteem may change with their environment and appear, state-based, yet others may appear to have stable, trait-based self-perceptions, consistent with their values, successes and failures (Harter, 1990, 2006).



However, some theorists argue that self-esteem is more complex than previously described, thus proposing the contingency model of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Crocker & Knight, 2005; Crocker, 2002a, 2002b; Crocker, Brook, Niiya, & Villacorta, 2006). Contingency of self-worth theory suggests that both trait and state-based self-worth fluctuates, based upon one's successes and failures (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Crocker and Wolfe (2001) explain how individuals can hold both state and trait-based evaluation for specific domains of self-perception as well as for a global sense of worth. When individuals have state-based self-evaluations they are inclined to state, "I am good/bad a math right now" versus trait-based evaluations stating, "I am good/bad at math in general". Although, trait-based self-esteem is more stable, but state-based self-esteem fluctuates based on the environment or his or her expectations (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001).

Crocker (2002a) suggests that individuals are continuously striving to protect and enhance their beliefs about themselves, thereby seeking out situations in which they are more inclined to experience successes as opposed to failures. Individuals are especially drawn towards activities which promote their self-perceptions for the domains of competence they value the most highly and thus these domains contribute most strongly to an individuals' self-worth (Crocker, 2002b). For instance, students who value academic success spend more time studying than those who value other areas of competency more highly (Crocker, 2002b).

According to Crocker and Knight (2005), "the importance of self-esteem lies in what people believe they need to be or do to have worth as a person" (p. 200). Rather than focusing on the value of self-esteem in regard to high versus low, Crocker and Knight (2005) suggest an individual's values and how he/she believes one has worth as a

person warrants closer attention. Individuals become motivated when they experience momentary drops in their state-self-worth and strive to increase their self-worth by meeting a goal or achieving an accomplishment (Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Knight, 2005). However, in doing so, individuals often become fixated on the momentary 'emotional high' to state-self-worth that comes with achievement and accomplishments and can become addicted to such highs (Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Knight, 2005). Thus, they continuously curtail their actions to achieve boosts to their self-worth. Unfortunately, when chasing such emotional highs, individual may give-up on activities that are challenging in order to avoid momentary low self-worth. "Pursuing self-esteem by attempting to validate one's abilities has costs for learning, relatedness, autonomy, self-regulation, and over time, physical and mental health" (Crocker & Knight, 2005, p. 201). Thus, a person's contingencies can serve either as a motivational factor or as a source of vulnerability.

Harter and Whitesell (2003) sought to introduce clarity into the debate regarding whether or not self-perception is stable or is inconsistent over time. They investigated three cohorts of adolescents and compared their self-perceptions at two points in time. The groups included adolescents transitioning from high school to college, adolescents in middle school over a 7 month time span, and high school students within differing contexts, including with parents, teacher, male classmates, and female classmates. The results from each study found that some students remained consistent between settings and time, but that others revealed significant fluctuations. Thus, Harter and Whitesell (2003) concluded that some individuals have internalized self-perceptions which are trait-

based, whereas others evaluate themselves differently, depending upon their contexts and situations, resulting in state-based self-perceptions.

### **Variables Related to Self-Perceptions and Self-Worth**

An individual's self-worth or self-esteem is related to self-efficacy because self-esteem is essentially one's feeling about him/herself, whereas self-efficacy is based on one's beliefs that he/she is capable of succeeding at something based upon his/her competence to perform the task. Specifically, "self-concept refers to self-perceptions formed through experience with the environment, and in particular, through environmental reinforcements and the reflected appraisals of others" (Pietsch, Walker, & Chapman, 2003, p. 589). Self-efficacy, however, refers to one's beliefs regarding his/her performance capabilities gained through vicarious experience or prior mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1997). Thus, "self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capability, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth" (Pastorelli, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Rola, Rozsa, & Bandura, 2001, p. 88).

Recent studies support the idea that there are multiple domains of self-efficacy, some of which include "academics, social, and self-regulatory efficacy to resist peer pressure for transgressive activities" (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001, p.126). Bandura contends that beliefs regarding one's self-efficacy play a vital role in affecting one's human agency and moral conduct (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001). Bandura elucidated the idea that the way in which an individual cognitively perceives him/herself and his/her competence has a profound influence on his/her ability and motivation.

Bandura (1977) outlined four sources through which one acquires efficacy information; these include experience with performance accomplishments, vicarious learning from models, one's state of emotional arousal, and the extent of verbal persuasion one receives. Self-efficacy is acquired primarily from information provided by one's family, followed by social interaction, such as information gained from peers and last by a child's experience in school and his or her academic success (Pastorelli et al., 2001). Thus each environment contributes to the development of one's self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, in accordance with social cognitive theory, self-efficacy beliefs profoundly determine one's motivation, well-being and personal success (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001).

Bandura's work and subsequent research has established a relationship between self-efficacy and its impact on academic performance across diverse individuals (Pietsch, Walker, & Chapman, 2003). Additionally, children with high perceptions of self-efficacy were more successful academically than were those with lower perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Capara, & Pastorelli, 1996). In a large meta-analysis study, Bandura and Locke (2003) gained support for their theory that perceived self-efficacy and personal goals increase motivation and goal attainment.

Learned helplessness is another phenomenon that can impact one's motivation. "The learned helplessness model claims that many depressions are caused by uncontrollable situations which lead the individual to believe that his responses are generally ineffective in obtaining reinforcement" (Klein & Seligman, 1976, p. 12). Learned helplessness can develop at those times when an individual faces repeated failure

and feels that he or she is incapable of changing his or her present circumstances, which has also been associated with the development of depression (Seligman, 1975).

Lack of control can also be explained by an individual's locus of control (Rotter, 1966). If individuals have an internal locus of control, they see their actions as responsible for their own outcomes, whereas individuals with an external locus of control see environmental factors as being more important than their actions (Rotter, 1966). For example, the byproduct of a learned helpless response might be attributing a successful outcome, such as a good grade on a test, to luck rather than attributing it to effective studying. Thus the perceived lack of control over one's environment can lead to generalized hopelessness, which is a key component in the behavioral theory of depression and poor motivation.

Decades of research have supported cognitive variables as playing critical roles in future achievement and motivation. Past studies revealed that a positive self-concept is correlated to academic success, with motivation playing a role as a mediating variable (Ames, 1978; Dweck, 1986; Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Chapman, 1988a). In fact, one study revealed that "perceived competence, control, and autonomy support were significant predictors of self-worth and grade point average" (Wiest, Wong, & Kreil, 1998). Individuals with positive self-perceptions have more motivation and try harder than those with negative self-perceptions when confronted with a challenging task (Bandura, 1982). However, those individuals with poor self-perceptions are more easily inclined to give-up and devote less effort to challenging tasks (Bandura, 1982).

Additionally, individuals with a high-self-esteem are more likely to have less anxiety (Brockner, 1984), are less depressed (Tennen & Herzberger, 1987), less hopeless

(Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine & Broadnax, 1994), and have increased life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995), compared with those with lower self-esteem. Diener (1984) found self-esteem to be more strongly correlated to life satisfaction than age, education, income, health, or marital status. Baumeister (1998) states that individuals possessing a high self-esteem are better equipped to cope with the inherent ups and downs in life, such as being faced with failure or experiencing setbacks. Inversely, a negative relationship was found between global self-worth and severity of depression among adolescents in whom perceived social acceptance demonstrated the strongest correlation to depression severity (King, Naylor, Segal, Evans, & Shain, 1993). Worse yet, findings suggest that low global self-worth is significantly related to increased risk of suicide for both male and female adolescents (Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004). For boys, low self-worth was related to increased incidences of being bullied and of alcohol use, whereas for girls, low self-worth was associated with increased, risky sexual activity (Wild, Flisher, Bhana, & Lombard, 2004).

### **Influential Factors on Academic Achievement**

According to Rogers (1951), “the self-concept ... is composed of one’s characteristics and abilities; the percepts and the concepts of the self in relation to others and the environment” (p. 136). Marsh (1987) sought to identify the directionality of the way in which academic self-concept and academic achievement were related. Prior research suggested that academic self-concept has a causal influence on future academic performance (Shavelson & Bolus, 1982). Marsh’s (1987) longitudinal study results suggest that one’s academic self-concept has a moderate influence on future school performance when prior academic ability and prior performance were controlled.

However, global self-concept was unrelated to future academic performance (Marsh, 1987). Marsh's (1987) research provides further evidence supporting a reciprocal relationship between academic performance and academic self-concept. Furthermore, Marsh (1987) suggests that academic self-concept consists of more than one's academic achievements; rather, "variables like academic motivation and effort that affect school performance independent of academic ability should affect academic self-concept, though such effects may be mediated through school performance" (p. 280). Marsh, Byrne, and Yeung's (1999) subsequent study provided additional support, indicating that academic self-concept plays a role in academic achievement which exceeds that which is predicted by past achievement.

Not only does children's academic self-concept correlate with their academic achievement, their home environment has been shown to have an indirect role impacting academic achievement (Song & Hattie, 1984). Family psychological characteristics, described as parental encouragement, expectations, educational activities within the home, parental beliefs regarding the child's intellectual capabilities, home rewards and punishments were found to have a direct impact on the child's self-concept (Song & Hattie, 1984). Thus, Song and Hattie (1984) found that family psychological characteristics have a direct impact on children's self-concept, which plays a mediating role to academic achievement.

Children value the perceptions of others with greater magnitude as they age (Cole, 1991). Research conducted with 360 fourth graders shows that the way in which a child is evaluated by his or her peers and teachers plays a critical role in the development of his or her self-perceptions (Cole, 1991). In a study investigating the extent of changes in

children's self-perceived competencies, the children's teachers' and peers' evaluations were predictive of changes in children's global self-worth and academic competencies over the course of one academic year (Cole, 1991). Additional studies have attested to the relationship between a teacher's perception and a child's academic self-perception (Stone, 1997; Stone & May, 2000; Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004). These findings support the notion that children's school environment plays an important role in influencing children's self-perceptions.

Additionally, research exploring children's ability to overcome their learning disabilities found that children's self-perceptions play a mediating role in their willingness to work hard and to use strategies they were taught in order to achieve academic success (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004). Children with learning disabilities, possessing positive academic self-perceptions not only demonstrated more effort, but also they were rated by their teachers as harder working and as academically competent as their non-learning disabled peers (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004). Additionally, those with negative self-perceptions were likely to experience additional academic failures and teachers reported them as less motivated and less academically competent, which places these students at increased risk for learned helplessness (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004). Thus, research suggests that children's self-perceptions have a mediating role on effort, which, in turn, creates a cyclical relationship with their teachers' perceptions and their own academic success (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004).



Complicating this cyclical relationship is the accuracy with which teachers typically are able to identify children at-risk for academic failure (Stevens & Pihl, 1982). Children at greater risk for academic failure, despite possessing normal intelligence, tend to be less cognitive and academically capable, more anxious, and suffer from lower self-concepts than their peers (Stevens & Pihl, 1982). Teachers' ratings are correlated with their students' measures of intelligence, anxiety, academic success, and self-concept (Stevens & Pihl, 1982). In addition, teachers' ratings are significantly correlated with students' academic outcomes (Stevens & Pihl, 1982). These correlations lend themselves to warrant the question of causality. Perhaps, a teacher's negative perceptions of a student are internalized by the student, thereby resulting in learned helplessness which puts the student at undo risk of academic failure. Inversely, perhaps the child has already developed learned helplessness and the teacher is keenly acute in recognizing the precursors leading to academic failure. This question of causality, for now, remains unanswered.

### **Utilizing Social Comparisons to Formulate Self-Perceptions**

According to social comparison theory, individuals engage in a process of evaluating their abilities compared with others in an effort to assess their strengths and weaknesses and conceptualize their capabilities and limitations (Festinger, 1954). Festinger (1954) suggests that individuals compare themselves with those whom they perceive as relatively similar to themselves. However, research has shown that this is not always the case (Wood, 1989). Individuals are not the "unbiased self-evaluators" previously described by Festinger (1954) (Wood, 1989, p.231). Individuals compare themselves with those who are more competent or less competent, depending upon their

personal attributes, such as motivational factors and desire for self-enhancement, or to protect their self-worth (Wood, 1989). When individuals compare themselves with those perceived as less competent, they are utilizing downward social comparisons (Willis, 1991). Engaging in downward social comparisons can inflate one's perceptions about him/herself (Suls, Martin, & Wheeler, 2002). On the other hand, when individuals compare themselves with those perceived as more competent, they engage in upward social comparisons, which can lead to increased negative self-evaluations (Wheeler, 1966). However, the negative consequences on one's self-perceptions may be short lived if comparing oneself with those with better abilities and/or attributes, providing motivation for self-improvement which is then attained (Collins, 1996). In a society in which individuals often feel pressured to improve, upward social comparisons are quite common (Wheeler, 1966). According to Wheeler (1966), highly motivated, goal-directed individuals are more frequently inclined to engage in upward social comparisons, which provide motivation and promote self-improvement.

There are several developmental and environmental variables that play a role in the development of children's propensities to engage in social comparisons. One influential variable is the shift which occurs in most school environments where teachers and grading systems no longer praise children's efforts as much as they praise their accuracy (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loeb, 1980). Thus, children's academic environment plays a significant role in the development of their self-esteem.

Additionally, as children gain the cognitive ability to draw inferences and apply deeper meaning to their social comparisons, they develop self-perceptions regarding their abilities (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loeb, 1980). Supporting Festinger's (1954)

social comparison theory, Rogers, Smith, and Coleman (1978) hypothesized that social comparisons serve as a mediating variable, affecting the correlation between academic achievement and self-concept. Results indicated that not only were children's academic achievement and self-concept related, but also that their self-concept differed, based upon their assignment to high-, medium-, and low-achievement groups. Thus this study supports the notion that engaging in social comparisons plays a significant role in determining children's self-concept. Based on their findings, Rogers, Smith, and Coleman (1978) suggest that two individuals with comparable academic achievement will have different self-concepts depending upon those with whom they compare themselves.

Research has indicated that children engage in social comparisons in a similar fashion as do adults (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). Beginning as early as kindergarten, children are curious about the performances of their peers. This curiosity intensifies as children age (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). In fact, children as young as 4 and 5 were found to engage in social comparisons (Yee & Brown, 1992). Initially this curiosity is used to compare tangible rewards in order to discern fairness and equal gain (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980). Children start to internalize these comparisons in their assessments of themselves at about 8 years of age (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980).

### **Social Status and In-Group versus Out-Group Effects**

Social status or class has been proven to play a significant role in influencing individuals' self-esteem (Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). In a study investigating the role of an individual's social class on the development of self-worth among groups of children,

adolescents, and adults, the findings revealed that social class was unrelated to children's self-esteem, modestly related to adolescents' self-esteem, and significantly related to adults' self-esteem (Rosenberg & Pearlin, 1978). Rosenberg and Pearlin (1978) suggest that the difference social status plays in regard to adult and children's self-esteem are due to differing social experiences. Adults attain their class status based on their education, on employment, and on family background; however, children are ascribed to their social class based on their parents' attainments. Wiltfang and Scarbecz (1990) reinvestigated social status by exploring other variables of class, such as a father's employment, neighborhood employment, and family welfare status in order to assess these factors' relatedness to adolescents' self-esteem. Results indicated that most of these variables were moderately related to adolescents' self-esteem; however, neighborhood unemployment had a more profound impact. Thus these findings support the theory that adolescents value socioeconomic status. An adolescent may experience adverse influences to his self-esteem if he or she perceives himself or herself as a member of a lower-social neighborhood.

Group status, such as belonging to the in-group versus the out-group, is another influential factor impacting children's self-esteem. The status of the group one belongs to appears to play a mediating role in how one's self-esteem is influenced by upward and downward social comparisons (Martinot & Redersdorff, 2006). Those belonging to the in-group are characterized as possessing a higher social status, higher SES, or more power or privileges; however, those belonging to the out-group are often the minority population, have less power, lower SES, and may be a stigmatized or stereotyped group (Martinot & Redersdorff, 2006). Collins (2000) suggests that to understand the influence

that social comparisons play on a person's self-esteem, one must first identify his or her group status and also consider the impact of upward or downward comparisons.

Social identity theory is an approach to social comparison theory that places emphasis on the individual's group status. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) proposal of social identity theory is based on several assumptions. First, individuals seek a positive self-concept and attempt to enhance their self-esteem. Second, different social groups are associated with positive and negative attributes. Third, a group's connotation is based on social comparisons and society's assessment of a group's attributes, value, or worth which determines whether a group has high or low prestige.

Turner (1975) explains a process whereby group competition can become independent of rewards and of fixated on in-group and out-group dynamics. This process is based on utilizing social identity theory which accounts for intergroup discrimination and stigmatization. Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed a model whereby individuals come to ascribe group membership and determine their own group identity through the following processes: categorizing or labeling individuals, identifying oneself to a certain group, making comparisons between groups, and desiring to rank one's group as more positive than others. The culmination of these processes can result in intergroup competition and, at times, discrimination from those belonging to the dominant group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1975).

Social status may play a mediating role for children as well. Nesdale and Flesser (2001) found children as young as 5 to be sensitive to group status effects. As children develop and become increasingly skilled at classifying stimuli based on similarities (Piaget, 1962), they ascribe worth and status to divergent groups. In one study, children

were randomly assigned to one of two groups after each drew a picture of himself or herself. One team was denoted as a team of 'excellent drawers' (high-status) and the other as 'good drawers' (low-status) (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). Findings from the study revealed that children developed an in-group and out-group characterization of the two groups; moreover, children in the low-status group expressed a desire to change groups (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). Children in the high-status group felt similar to other high-status members, whereas those in the low-status group felt less similar to one another unless told that there was no possibility to change groups (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). Thus, even at a young age, children tend to develop a sense of their own social identity and foster attitudes regarding their own group standing and other social groups. Nesdale & Flessner (2001) discuss the implication of the study relative to children's fostering beliefs of in-group and out-group status pertaining to race, academic standing, sports, and disability.

Group classifications can be problematic when the dominant group expresses negative attitudes towards those in the less dominant group (Nesdale & Flessner, 2001). However, the researchers assert that group identification can be beneficial when group status is stable, for example, when characterized by physical characteristics. In these cases it can create togetherness and belonging within the non-dominant group, similar to ethnic pride (Nesdal & Flessner, 2001). Although children's preferences to belong to the high-status group may be related to a sense of devaluing their lower-status group, more research in this area is required to determine the impact that group status has on children's self-worth.

Klima and Repetti (2008) examined the directional influence that peer relationships and psychological adjustment had on each other in a 2-year longitudinal study. Their findings revealed a one-way relationship between poorer peer acceptance and negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors and lower global self-worth, whereas low self-worth and negative psychological adjustment was unrelated to later peer acceptance (Klima & Repetti, 2008). These findings suggest that poor peer acceptance may serve as a precursor to adverse psychological functioning.

### **Influence of Peer Relation on Self-perceptions and Academic Success**

Poor peer acceptance has not only been linked to deficits in psychological functioning, but also to declines in academic performance. According to Wiest, Wong, and Kreil (1998), school status and symptoms of depression were significant predictors of academic performance. A longitudinal study investigating the link between children's peer acceptance and academic performance found that a lack of social acceptance in fourth grade was predictive of lower academic achievement for those students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). After investigating this relationship future, social acceptance was found to influence children's academic success indirectly by having a direct impact on their academic self-concepts and internalized symptoms which were mediating variables to academic performance.

In an environment where academic success is paramount, children are evaluated by their peers, based on their scholastic success. Those who struggle academically fall victim to negative feedback from their peers and are at increased risk of not attaining social acceptance (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). The feedback children receive from their peers is then internalized and affects their beliefs about themselves and their

abilities, thus increasing their risks for academic failure (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). These findings held true for a sample of Chinese children, whose self-perceptions and school success were reciprocally influential on one another (Chen, He, & Li, 2004).

As children engage in social comparisons, they become increasingly skilled at classifying their peers within specific categories, such as sociable, aggressive, shy, and intelligent. They identify those who are good or poor readers, who always know the answers, or who never know the answers. Until recently, few studies explored how academic reputation and behavioral reputation among one's peers predicts future scholastic success (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005). In the study of 400 children in grades 3 through 5, children nominated their peers into classifications based on behavioral conduct and academic skills (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005). The children's ratings correlated moderately with teachers' ratings of the students' academic skills, both at the present time and after academic changes during the course of the year (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005). Students possessing a positive scholastic reputation were correlated with increased social acceptance, whereas those with poor academic reputations were less accepted (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005). Gest, Domitrovich and Welsh (2005) found that a child's academic reputation amongst his/her classmates was related to the child's academic self-concept. A child's self-concept serves as a mediating variable which impacts his/her effort and academic achievement, as assessed a year later on teachers' reports regarding effort and skills (Gest, Domitrovich, & Welsh, 2005). Thus these findings suggest that children's academic reputations impact their self-concept, future academic success, and peer acceptance.



### **The Big Fish-Little Pond Effect on Self-perceptions**

The social comparisons that individuals engage in have proven to play a critical role in determining their self-perceptions. Further investigating the role of social comparisons, Marsh and Parker (1984) investigated how students' self-concepts differed in relation to their school environment when academic abilities were constant. Two school environments were compared, high-socioeconomic status (SES) and low-SES school settings. Correlations were found between high-SES environments and high-academic ability of students, whereas low-SES schools were correlated with low-ability. Having established two environments, one with higher performing students and the other with lower performing students, Marsh and Parker sought to compare matched students with equal academic achievement and determine how these two environments affected their academic self-concepts. Results indicated a paradoxical effect in regard to socioeconomic status (SES) between school environment and home environment. Students attending schools with high-SES environments and high-academic ability had significantly poorer academic self-concepts than students attending low-SES and low-achievement ability schools. However, families' SES revealed a positive correlation with adolescents' self-concepts, because families with higher SES were associated with increased academic self-perceptions. Marsh and Parker's (1984) findings support the relevance of social comparison theory, and further suggest that individual's self-concepts may be at undo risk when students are placed in an environment in which they are surrounded by more academically competent students. Marsh and Parker (1984) coined the term the little fish-big pond effect (LFBPE); the opposite is true for students that perform better than those with whom they compare themselves, denoted as the big fish-

little pond effect (BFLPE). One limitation to this study was that race may have served as a contributing variable reflecting the BFLPE.

Marsh (1987) assessed differences in self-concept between African American and Caucasian students and found that distinctions were evident between races; however, these differences can be attributed to the BFLPE rather than to response biases. In comparing races, African American students revealed a slightly lower academic self-concept but slightly higher global self-concept and the inverse was true for Caucasian students. In this study, comparing lower academic achieving African American and Caucasian students, the African American population who attended schools with lower-ability students revealed higher academic self-perception scores than the Caucasian students who attended schools with higher-ability students. Thus, although their ability was comparable, their reference groups differed. Thus, Marsh's (1987) study provides support for the generalizability of the BFLPE between races. Further support for external validity and generalizability of the BFLPE was described by Marsh (2005), following the review of multiple studies across 26 countries revealing support for the BFLPE.

### **Ethnicity Effects**

When Thomson and Zand (2002) administered Harter's (1988a) *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA) to an African American adolescent population and analyzed the results, they found that ethnicity does seem to play a role in how children perceive themselves. The original population sample used to assess the validity and reliability of the SPPA was composed of 90% Caucasian adolescents, thus further investigation to assess the generalizability of the measure was essential. Based on the results of this study, the measure was consistent in assessing African American

adolescents' physical appearance and athletic competence domains. However, all other subscale domains yielded slightly different factors for the African American adolescent population than the original population's emerging factors (Thomson & Zand, 2002).

Another study explored the generalizability of the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (Harter, 1985) with a Mexican American sample of children, ranging from 8 to 13 years old. Study findings revealed consistency between the original sample and the Mexican American sample (Hess & Petersen, 1996). Thus the investigators suggest that their findings support the use of the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* for Mexican-American children (Hess & Petersen, 1996). In sum, the generalizability of Harter's (1995, 1988a) measures of self-perception appear inconsistent between varying ethnic populations and further research is warranted in assessing its generalizability.

Ethnicity has been hypothesized to play a moderating role affecting individuals' self-perceptions as well. Ethnic differences were observed in Bouchev and Harter's (2005) research in which Latino adolescents had lower self-perceptions of academic competence in math and science compared with European American adolescents. Moreover, Coleman (2004) found that children with high academic performance and superior cognitive abilities are likely to have higher academic self-worth and global self-worth scores compared with their lower achieving peers. This finding remained consistent among African American samples as well (Coleman, 2004). Therefore, the role that ethnicity has on self-perception requires further exploration.

### **Gender Effects**

Findings of Thomson and Zand's (2002) study comparing African American and Caucasian adolescents' self-perceptions revealed some gender discrepancies in the

African American sample which were consistent with the findings of Harter's (1988a) *Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA) sample that studied a primarily Caucasian population. Gender differences were noted for both populations on the subscales for global self-worth, athletic competence, and romantic appeal, in which boys' revealed higher scores than girls across these domains (Thomson & Zand, 2002). However, no gender differences were observed for the physical appearance domain for the African American population in the 1988 survey findings, whereas in the predominantly Caucasian population, boys scored higher than girls (Harter, 1988a).

Significant gender differences were noted in a study investigating children's self-efficacy beliefs across three nations, including Poland, Hungary, and Italy (Pastorelli et al., 2001). Pastorelli and colleagues (2001) found that girls demonstrated higher self-efficacy beliefs towards academic achievement and higher self-efficacy towards resistance to peers pressure for transgressive behaviors (Pastorelli et al., 2001). In a study investigating competency beliefs held by elementary age children, girls revealed higher competence beliefs for reading and music domains, but boys revealed more positive competency beliefs for mathematics and sports (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993).

Gender differences were found in self-esteem domains within the adult population. Gentile, Grabe, Dolan-Pascoe, and Wells's (2009) found that on adult measures of self-esteem, men scored higher than women on physical appearance, personal self, and self-satisfaction domains of self-esteem, whereas women scored higher than men on behavioral conduct and moral-ethical domains of self-esteem. However, unlike some finding with children and adolescents, no gender differences were found for

academic, social acceptance, family and affect domains related to self-esteem with the adult population (Gentile, Grabe, Dolan-Pascoe, & Wells, 2009).

### **Influence of Giftedness on Children's Self-perceptions**

Gifted children's self-worth is likely to vary, depending upon their ability to engage in upward or downward social comparison, according to Marsh (1987) who studied the big fish-little pond effect on gifted students' academic self-concepts. Classroom environment has been proven to impact gifted children's self-concept (Coleman & Fults, 1982; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, Roche, 1995). Although gifted children and high academically performing children have more robust self-perceptions than their average or below average academically performing peers (Tidwell, 1980a; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Coleman & Fults, 1982; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993), internal group differences have been found for gifted children receiving pullout enrichment versus those who remain in the Regular Education classroom (Coleman & Fults, 1982). Supporting Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, gifted children tend to compare themselves with other gifted children rather than with their average achieving peers (Coleman & Fults, 1982). "Within the educational mainstream, the capabilities of the gifted are likely to be exceptional; within the gifted program the same capabilities are only typical. Social comparison theory would predict a transition to lower self-concept" (Coleman & Fults, 1985, p. 8). In Coleman and Fults' (1982) research, gifted children were found to have declines in their self-concepts following their placement in a weekly gifted and talented enrichment class. However, prior to this placement they had more robust self-concepts which were comparable with their non-gifted, high achieving peers. Additionally, gender differences were observed and female gifted children tended to have

higher self-concepts than male gifted students; however, no gender differences were found between high achieving male and female students (Coleman & Fults, 1982). Upon further investigation Coleman and Fults (1985) found that gifted student with lower ability suffered greater self-esteem declines than did gifted students with higher abilities. These findings further support the big fish-little pond theory.

Additional evidence supporting the big fish-little pond theory was found in two studies investigating gifted children's academic self-concept, compared with non-academic self-concept (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, Roche, 1995). Both studies revealed declines in the gifted children's academic self-concepts, including reading, math, and school domains, following their placement into Gifted Support programs; however, non-academic self-concept domains: peer relations, appearance, and parent relations, remained consistent (Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995). These findings were consistent across age, gender, and ability levels.

Contrary to Coleman and Fults's (1982; 1985) findings, according to Kulik and Kulik's (1991) meta-analysis, students' self-concepts were found to be unaffected by their academic placements, or, in some cases, increases in self-concept were noted following their placement into gifted classes. However, Kulik and Kulik (1991) acknowledge that their conclusion is tentative, because there are relatively few studies that explore the self-concepts of gifted children. Additional finding from their meta-analysis indicated that gifted children placed in classes for exceptional children had increased academic gains, compared with gifted students who remained in more heterogeneous class environments (Kulik & Kulik, 1991). Additionally, Tidwell's (1980a) study involving 1,592 gifted high school students placed in a homogeneous

academic environment for exceptional children, found that gifted children often denied having special abilities or talents and minimized recognitions for past achievements. Furthermore, Kulik and Kulik (1991) dispute any contention that gifted children placed in homogeneous classes are smug or elitist. Thus they are strong proponents for segregated gifted and talented programming.

Research pertaining to gender differences in gifted children's self-concepts has produced inconsistent results. In some studies, gender differences were observed. One study found that female gifted children possessed higher global self-concept scores than males (Milgram, & Milgram, 1976). However, subsequent research with adolescents found boys scored higher in global self-worth and physical competence than girls (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989). In other research, Hoge and McSheffrey (1991) found no significant gender or age differences in the self-concepts of gifted children.

With respect to age differences, Harter (1982) hypothesized that self-concept develops throughout childhood, thus suggesting that children's self-perceptions change according to their developmental stage. Marsh (1987) suggests that children are more susceptible to the BFLPE in elementary school, because younger children have a narrower frame of reference and thus rely heavily on social comparisons to establish their sense of self-worth. In contrast, older students are more highly inclined to have a vast frame of reference. However, neither gender nor age produced statistically significant differences in Hoge and Rezulli's (1993) meta-analysis. Thus, the debate remains unsettled regarding the extent to which gender or age affects gifted children's self-concepts.

Although research results are inconclusive with respect to those self-perception domains that correlate most strongly with global self-worth (Harter, 1982; Byrne & Schneider, 1988), social acceptance was found to be the strongest correlate to global self-worth in one study comprising of fifth to eight grade gifted children (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991). Although other studies suggest that gifted children tend to perceive themselves as unpopular (Tidwell, 1980a) and have lower scores of social and athletic acceptance compared with their non-gifted peers (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991), gifted children have demonstrated higher academic self-perceptions and global self-worth than non-gifted children (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991). Additionally, academic competence appears significantly and more closely related to global self-worth for gifted children than for non-gifted children, with an even higher correlation found for girls than for boys (Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991). Moreover, gifted children generally rate themselves as happy (Tidwell, 1980a). Thus, although they continue to weight social acceptance as important, scholastic competence, which is typically higher for gifted children, is more influential in predicting their global self-worth.

With respect to ethnicity, Tidwell, (1980b) investigated differences in self-concept among gifted children in four ethnic groups. His findings revealed significant differences in gifted children's self-esteems between racial groups (Tidwell, 1980b). Caucasian gifted children demonstrated the highest self-concept scores followed by African American gifted children. In contrast, Asian gifted children demonstrated the lowest self-esteem scores (Tidwell, 1980b). In following investigations of ethnic group differences among gifted children, Cornell, Delcourt, Golberg, and Bland (1995) found Caucasian gifted children had higher achievement scores than both African American and



Hispanic gifted children. However, no ethnic group differences were found in social or academic self-concept domains. Moreover, although gifted Caucasian students' perceptions about their academic competence correlated well with their performances on achievement testing, gifted African American children's perceptions of academic competence were unrelated to their achievement performances (Cornell, Delcourt, Golberg, & Bland, 1995). Therefore, correlations between children's academic self-concepts and academic successes found in the majority population may not be generalizable to African American gifted children. Further research to investigate the correlation between gifted children's self-perceptions and academic performance is critical, because ethnicity may play a pivotal role.

### **Variables Impacting Children with Learning Disabilities' Self-perceptions**

Children with learning disabilities (LD) have a unique condition impacting the development of their self-perceptions. The identification of a learning disability generally follows after a child demonstrates a lack of meaningful academic progress despite appropriate education (IDEIA, 2004, Public Law 108-446). Children warranting a diagnosis of learning disabled, experience academic failure or struggle with mastering skills in a manner equivalent to their peers. Following these children's academic struggles, and failure in some cases, they are then classified with a diagnosis of a learning disability, ascribing them to a stigmatized group. Additionally, having persistent learning difficulties place these children at risk for developing an external locus of control, learned helplessness, lower self-perceptions, and lower academic achievement expectations (Chapman, 1988b). These negative characteristics are more pronounced for children diagnosed with learning disabilities (Chapman, 1988b). However, Chapman (1988a;

1988b) found that children who meet the criteria for a diagnosed learning disability, but are not receiving remediation, suffer the most severely and revealed the lowest self-perceptions compared both with learning disabled students receiving support and with Regular Education students. Moreover, these negative characteristics remained stable across a two-year time span, indicating internalized attributions as a result of prior academic hardship (Chapman, 1988b). Children diagnosed with a learning disability demonstrate declines in their self-concept around third grade and remained consistently lower when measured in grade 8 and grade 10 (Chapman, 1988a). Thus, having endured academic hardship, children with learning disabilities' self-esteem may decrease due to long lasting, negative self-evaluation.

Ample research has investigated the relationship between children with learning disabilities and low self-esteem, and many factors have been identified either as catalysts or as buffers to the development of negative beliefs about one's self. Factors associated with serving to increase or lessen these children's self-worth and academic self-perceptions include: 1) the value the child ascribes to academic success (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999); 2) with whom one compared oneself (Hettinger, 1982); 3) inclusion versus self-contained Learning Support (Weiner & Tardif, 2004; Rollins, 2007; Cooney, Jahoda, & Knott, 2006; Renick & Harter, 1989); 4) the extent to which the individual is academically impaired by his/her learning disability (Heyman, 1990); 5) an internal versus external locus of control (Hagborg, 1996); 6) perceived self-efficacy or perceived competence (Rothman & Cosden, 1995); and 7) the extent to which one experiences stigmatization and social acceptance (Juvonen & Bear, 1992; Wiener & Schneider, 2002; Vaughn, Haager, Hogan

& Kouzekanani, 1992; Sage & Kindermann, 1999). Each of these factors influences how children with learning disabilities view themselves.

In a large meta-analysis study, Chapman (1988a) found that in 19 of 20 studies comparing learning disabled students with non-learning disabled students, the learning disabled group had statistically significant lower academic self-concepts compared with their peers. Additionally, research with children diagnosed with dyslexia found these children to have significantly lower self-perceptions of scholastic competence than their non-learning disabled peers (Frederickson & Jacobs, 2001). Locus of control was found to be related to the children's negative self-perceptions in this study as well (Fredrickson & Jacobs, 2001). The children's attributions of their ability to control their scholastic success was investigated and findings revealed that the children with lower perceived scholastic competence were correlated with uncontrollable attribution, whereas those with higher scholastic self-perceptions held controllable attributions, regardless of the student's actual reading ability (Fredrickson & Jacobs, 2001). Thus, locus of control regarding beliefs that one can master a skill appears related to a child's self-perception of competence.

In another study investigating variables associated with group differences between middle school children with learning disabilities, children fell into three categories based upon having high, medium, and low scholastic competence scores (Hagborg, 1996). Within these groups, factors with significant correlation to academic success and scholastic competence were: global self-worth, school attitude, and an internal locus of control (Hagborg, 1996). Inversely, those students with poorer school attitudes, a tendency to give-up when confronted by academic difficulty and poor global

self-worth scores were correlated with poorer scholastic competence scores and poor academic performance (Hagborg, 1996). Variables found to have a slight correlation with perceived scholastic competence for children with learning disabilities were: cognitive ability, academic achievement, age at diagnosis, amount of special education support, and socioeconomic status (Hagborg, 1996).

Research by Heyman (1990) was consistent with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy model because children's self-perception regarding the extent to which they were impaired by their learning disability, such as viewing one's disability as delineated versus global, or as modifiable versus permanent, and the degree to which it is stigmatizing, plays a significant role impacting children's academic self-concept and global self-esteem. These findings held true regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, math and reading achievement, self-contained, versus mainstream Learning Support placements, and age of the child's learning disability diagnosis (Heyman, 1990).

Supporting Heyman's (1990) findings, and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy model, Rothman and Cosden (1995) further investigated children's perceptions regarding their learning disability and how it impacts their self-esteem. Children's perceptions regarding not only their learning disability, but also the extent to which they were limited, correlated with their academic success (Rothman & Cosden, 1995). Thus, perhaps, more detrimental than the existence of a learning disability is how students conceptualized their impairments. Those holding less negative beliefs regarding their learning disability had higher self-esteem, more positive behavioral competence, increased social acceptance, and increased academic gains; however, the opposite was true for those who held negative beliefs about their learning disability (Rothman & Cosden, 1995). Correlations

were found between having a negative attitude regarding one's learning disability and believing that one had less cognitive competence. This held true regardless of the extent of students' academic discrepancies, levels of impairment, or intellectual ability (Rothman & Cosden, 1995).

One may hypothesize that having a parent or teacher explain to children the extent to which their learning disability may be limiting would minimize distortions or negative attribution about their disability; however, research has found that children with greater knowledge about their learning disability had increased negative perceptions and lower self-esteem ratings than those without knowledge regarding their impairment (Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999). The researchers proposed that perhaps a lack of knowledge served as a buffer from the reality of their disability and the children were better able to deny or avoid acknowledging their learning disability (Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999).

Social comparisons play an important role in how children develop their self-perceptions (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loeb, 1980). In a study investigating how children with learning disabilities perceive themselves, by comparing themselves with other learning disabled children versus non-learning disabled peers, social comparisons were found to play a pivotal role in the development of their self-perceptions (Renick & Harter, 1989). According to Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, individuals tend to compare themselves with others they perceive as having matched abilities or skills. However, some research results suggest this is not the case for children with learning disabilities (Renick & Harter, 1989). In Renick and Harter's (1989) research, 84 % of children with a learning disability opted to compare themselves with their non-

learning disabled peers, even though in doing so they damaged their self-perceptions, as demonstrated by lower scholastic competence and lower global self-worth scores. Smith and Nagle (1995) found that children with learning disabilities reported lower perceived competence in academic ability, intelligence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct, compared with children without learning disabilities. However, contrary to Renick and Harter's (1988) earlier findings, the children's perceptions were consistent regardless of their reference group (Smith & Nagel, 1995). Thus, research has produced contradictory findings regarding the extent to which social comparisons impact children's self-evaluations; however, consistently, children with learning disabilities tended to reveal lower self-perceptions across several domains, compared with non-disabled peers.

In studies of adolescents ranging from 11 to 16 years old, with learning disabilities, Crabtree and Rutland (2001) found that both the degree of importance that children placed on successful areas, such as athletic competence, and with whom they made social comparisons, had a profound impact on the children's self-perceptions and self-worth. These findings provide further support for both James' (1892) and Festinger's (1954) theories. Thus the adolescents with learning disabilities had comparable self-perceptions with their non-learning, disabled peers when placing greater weight on areas in which they were successful and comparing themselves with peers with matched or poorer performance (Crabtree & Rutland, 2001).

Similar findings supporting James' (1892) theory were evident in a study of three groups of adolescents (those developing normally, those with learning disabilities, and those with behavioral disorders); those either with learning disabilities or behavioral disorders were able to maintain a high self-worth despite having low perceived scholastic

competence or behavioral conduct if they weighted other domains, such as social acceptance, romantic appeal, or physical appearance, as more important (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998). These findings were replicated in a subsequent study (Cosden, Elliott, Noble, & Kelemen, 1999). However, despite prior suggestions that children will value the domains in which they are most successful to protect their self-worth, Smith and Nagle (1995) found that both learning disabled and non-learning disabled students valued academic competency similarly. Thus, having a learning disability or behavioral disorder is not indicative of developing poor self-esteem. However, in a society that places high regard on cognitive competence, scholastic success, and appropriate behavioral conduct, children with weaknesses in these areas tend to place equal importance on these domains, as do their normally developing peers; thus they are at greater risk for developing a low self-esteem based on their lack of success in an area perceived as important (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998).

Additionally, some children with learning disabilities are at risk for long-term residual negative impacts as a result of their disabilities. Carroll and Iles (2006) looked at a sample of students diagnosed with dyslexia that demonstrated good compensatory strategies and were highly capable and successful college students. Despite the ability to compensate for their disabilities, these students continued to demonstrate slower reading speeds, had increased levels of state anxiety when administered a reading task, and had increased levels of trait anxiety related both to academic and to social domains, compared with non-dyslexic students (Carroll & Iles, 2006). These findings suggest that past deficits in academic competence not only impact one's anxiety during state-based tasks, but also that their lowered expectation of academic competence has become internalized.

Carroll and Iles (2006) hypothesize that both increased social and academic anxiety are connected to early school experiences, in which academic achievement and social status may be related. These associations between academic success and social status become the catalyst for increased internalized anxiety.

Social acceptance is another critical factor affecting how children feel about themselves. Unfortunately, children with learning disabilities are often at undo risk for peer rejection and stigmatization. In a study investigating children's academic success and motivation, children who demonstrated active on-task behaviors and motivation toward school work were more likely to receive peer approval, whereas those who were off-task or unmotivated received disapproval (Sage & Kindermann, 1999). This contingency is detrimental for children with learning disabilities, who perhaps are experiencing learned helplessness, as well as for children with behavioral disorders, who tend to be off-task.

In other research, children with learning disabilities were found to have fewer close friendships, less stable relationships, higher levels of conflict, less validating friendships, and more friendships with other LD peers and younger children, when compared with non-learning disabled peers (Wiener & Schneider, 2002). Additionally, Gresham and colleagues (1997) have found correlations between learning disabilities and poorer social skills. In a meta-analysis reviewing studies that compared children with learning disabilities to low-achieving, average-achieving, and high-achieving children, the children with learning disabilities and the low-achievement children were found to have less social acceptance and lower social status. Moreover, teachers rated both groups as demonstrating poorer social skills compared with their average- and high-achieving



peers (Nowicki, 2003). This research suggests that the children with learning disabilities and students with low-academic achievement are less socially accepted and may demonstrate social skills deficits. However, students' poor social status may result either from a social skills deficit or peers' and teachers' attitudes toward children with weaker academic performance (Nowicki, 2003). Thus, these meta-analysis studies' findings support the notion that academic success is related to social acceptance for children because of society's value on academic success in school.

However, not all children with learning disabilities seem to experience adverse social consequences. In a 4-5 year prospective study, 239 children from an urban setting were followed from kindergarten through fourth grade and were assessed, based on peer acceptance (Vaughn, Haager, Hogan & Kouzekanani, 1992). The children consisted of three academic groups, children with learning disabilities, children who were low-academic achievers but not learning disabled, and average and high achieving children (Vaughn, Haager, Hogan & Kouzekanani, 1992). The results indicated that the only difference regarding social acceptance was for the average to high achieving group; these demonstrated increased social acceptance compared with the low achieving group (Vaughn, Haager, Hogan & Kouzekanani, 1992). Additionally, no social difficulties were noted for children with learning disabilities either prior to or after their diagnoses (Vaughn, Haager, Hogan & Kouzekanani, 1992). However, the researchers assert that the generalizability of these findings may be limited based on the small size of the sample. Moreover, these results may be representative only of children in urban school settings.

Edwards, Patrick, & Topolski, (2003) suggest that steps to reduce exclusion may improve quality of life for adolescents with disabilities, based on their findings that

adolescents with disabilities, whether these were learning disabilities, emotional disorders, or physical disabilities, reported having a lower quality of life compared with peers who did not have disabilities. In other research comparing children with and without a learning disability in an inclusion or integrated classroom, Juvonen and Bear (1992) found comparable ratings for both groups on acceptance and unpopular sociometric peer nomination scores. Thus, the children with learning disabilities were perceived by their classmates as having friends, perceived themselves as having friends, and of having reciprocal friendships (Juvonen & Bear, 1992). This research suggests that the integrated nature of the class is likely to reduce stigmatization and increase acceptance of children with learning disabilities (Juvonen & Bear, 1992).

The debate regarding inclusion versus self-contained Learning Support for children with learning disabilities is far from resolved. Both academic placements have demonstrated some benefits and some shortcomings for children with learning disabilities. Meta-analytic reviews have made a case for both placements (Weiner & Tardif, 2004). The amendment to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act enacted in 1975, and came into effect in 1977 (Public Law [PL] 94-142), mandated the inclusion of children with disabilities to remain with their non-disabled peers for as much of their education as possible. The act is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Public Law 108-446), which mandates to “provide ‘free and appropriate education’ (FAPE) in the ‘least restrictive environment’ (LRE)” (Bursztyn, 2006, p. 45). Regulated by the US Department of Education, children can be removed from the Regular Education class and provided education in a Learning Support placement if their educational needs cannot be met within the Regular Education class

environment (Bursztyn, 2006). Since the enactment of this mandate, a plethora of research studies have investigated the benefits and shortcomings of the inclusion of children with disabilities with non-disabled peers.

According to Marsh and Craven (2002) this push for inclusion stems from the labeling theory which assumes that excluding children with learning disabilities will further stigmatize this population. However, based on social comparison theory, children with disabilities are likely to have lower academic self-concepts when integrated with non-disabled peers (Marsh & Craven, 2002). Thus, “predictions based on BFLPE research suggest that academically disadvantaged students will have higher self-concepts when grouped with other academically disadvantaged students” (Marsh, 2005, p. 12).

Tracey and March (2000) found that children with poor academic competence feel more socially excluded when mainstreamed in the Regular Education class than when receiving pull-out education. The children's ability to engage in downward social comparisons appears to protect their self-esteem, as evidenced when children with LD compared themselves with other children with LD instead of their non-LD peers (Renick & Harter, 1989). Cooney, Jahoda, Knott (2006) found that children with learning disabilities placed in inclusion settings had more “ambitious work-related aspirations”; however, they experienced increased stigmatizing treatment from their peers in an inclusion placement versus pull-out placements (p.432). In a more recent study, children with learning disabilities in an inclusion classes demonstrated greater academic gains than the pull-out Learning Support group; however, the pull-out group demonstrated higher self-concept scores (Rollins, 2007).

In contrast to these results, another study found only marginal differences between children receiving inclusion versus self-contained Learning Support (Weiner & Tardif, 2004). Children with learning disabilities in both placements demonstrated significant deficits pertaining to reciprocated friendships, poorer quality friendships, lower academic self-perceptions, increased levels of loneliness and depression, more behavioral concerns, and reduced peer acceptance, when compared with non-LD students (Weiner & Tardif, 2004). However, those in the self-contained placement were found to have slightly lower ratings in these areas compared with those in the inclusion placements although the difference was not statistically significant (Weiner & Tardif, 2004).

In a meta-analysis investigating the impact of academic placement for children with learning disabilities, the results indicated that academic placement was unrelated to disparities in children's self-concept; however, children who did not receive any remediation had significantly lower self-concepts, compared with children who received remediation supports (Chapman, 1988a). However, academic self-concept was significantly correlated to academic achievement (Chapman, 1988a). In fact, in comparing children with learning disabilities to non-disabled peers, "the magnitude of difference is fairly substantial. The average LD student obtained an academic self-concept score around the 19<sup>th</sup> percentile, implying that 81 % of LD students have lower academic self-concepts than the average non-handicapped student" (Chapman, 1988a, p. 362). Thus, children with learning disabilities have more negative self-perceptions affecting their self-concepts. Although academic placement for children with learning disabilities has proven to affect their academic performances, self-concept, and level of

stigmatization, the debate continues regarding which placement has fewer detrimental implications but has increased benefits.

Consistent with Harter, Whitesell, and Junkin's (1998) findings, some children who struggle academically may be protected from developing a negative self-concept (Hettinger, 1982). In a study investigating the self-concepts of 83 eighth grade students throughout the academic year following their placement into a class for students with reading deficiencies, the students' self-concepts remained stable and were not negatively impacted by their placement (Hettinger, 1982). Several unique variables to this sample may be related to these students' propensities to maintain healthy self-concepts; these include their ability to engage in social comparisons with peers of equivalent reading skills within their new classroom or include the fact that they received reading support without being labeled as learning disabled. These variables warrant further investigation as potential buffers preventing poor self-perceptions.

Some children appear to have more positive attributions regarding their learning disability, which helps foster a healthy self-worth despite their disability (Bear & Minke, 1996). Bear and Minke (1996) found evidence to support Renick and Harter's (1988) hypothesis that children's perceptions about their disabilities regarding a skills deficit versus a cognitive or intellectual deficit impacts one's global self-worth. In an item analysis, comparing items regarding the children's attribution regarding ease with which they can complete school work and feeling that they may not be as smart as classmates, children who perceived their academic performance as lower than peers but intelligence as comparable with peers, demonstrated more robust global self-worth (Bear & Minke, 1996). Additionally, the positive feedback children received from their teachers was

significant in influencing how children with LD perceived their academic competence as indicated by increased positive feelings of self-worth (Bear & Minke, 1996).

In other research, Chapman (1988a) rejected the notion of social comparison as a critical variable impacting learning disabled children's self-perceptions. Rather, Chapman (1988a) argued that children with LD tended to have only modest declines in self-concepts when they received remedial academic support that helped them achieve success and feel competent. However, children with LD who remained in the Regular Education class, thus not receiving remedial support, revealed the lowest self-concepts. Thus, academic placement, inclusion versus pull-out and social comparisons may play a mediating role in affecting self-concept, but the quality of academic support plays a predominant role.

### **Influence of Social Status and Peer Victimization on Children's Self-worth**

Peer relationships can lead to declines in children's self-worth, especially peer-rejection or bullying at school (Harter, 2006). Research has shown a relationship between being bullied and having poor self-esteem (Spade, 2007). Additionally, those who bully are correlated with poor self-esteem (Spade, 2007). Other research has found that children with lower self-esteem and lower social status are at increased risk of being bullied (Cassidy, 2009). The definition of bullying or victimization includes both overt behaviors, such as hitting, kicking, yelling, teasing, threatening and more indirect or relational behaviors, including: excluding or spreading rumors (Olweus, 1996). Victimization may be inflicted by one peer or by a group of peers (Olweus, 1996). Isolated incidents of teasing and mutual teasing between peers are not considered bullying. Rather, two components are required to qualify as bullying 1) an imbalance of

power, perhaps due to size, social status, or grade, and 2) the incidents occurring in a repetitive, persistent manner over time (Olweus, 1995; Olweus, 1993). It usually occurs between people who are not friends. The general atmosphere is one of intimidation, and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend him/herself (Olweus, 1996).

Children with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable to bullying by their peers. In a study investigating the propensity of bullying between fifth grade students, both with and without learning difficulties, the students with learning disabilities reported significantly more incidents of victimization by peers than did students without learning disabilities (Luciano, & Savage, 2007). Upon further exploration between the tendency for children to be victimized more or less depending on inclusion or pull-out Learning Support, findings indicated that both groups of learning disabled students report comparable rates of bullying (Luciano, & Savage, 2007). Relational bullying is defined as verbal acts of aggression, such as spreading rumors, socially excluding, or damaging one's peer relationships. In a one-year prospective study, adolescents experiencing relational bullying were more likely to have symptoms of social phobia; however, general social anxiety and avoidance were unrelated to prior relational victimization (Storch, Masia-Warner, Crisp, Klien, 2005). According to Coady (2006), after behavioral factors were removed, children with learning disabilities were not subject to increased rates of victimization compared with non-learning disabled peers. However, boys tended to report increased rates of victimization compared with girls between both LD and non-LD peers (Coady, 2006).

Despite the social and emotional impacts documented for children with learning disabilities, the negative impacts may fade over time. In a 10-year longitudinal study

comparing young adults, between 21 and 24 years old, both with and without learning disabilities, the impact of their disability was minimized (Seo, Abbott, Hawkins, 2008). The studies indicate that there was no significant difference for those adults previously diagnosed with a LD and those without a LD on rates of postsecondary school attainment, employment, level of income, criminal behavior, and feelings of victimization (Seo, Abbott, Hawkins, 2008). Thus, perhaps the impact of being diagnosed with a LD and future success and feelings of victimization dissipate over time.

In another longitudinal study investigating the factors that increase adolescents' risks of peer victimization and the psychosocial outcomes from being a bullying victim, found that being bullied was associated with internalizing behaviors, measured as lower scores of global self-worth and perception of social acceptance, in cases in which internalizing behaviors were a predictive risk factor associated with victimization by peers (Weissman, 2006). Thus, according to these findings, bullying creates a cyclical pattern in which victimization increases internalizing behaviors, which promotes further victimization.

Neary and Joseph (1994) developed a scale to aid in identifying children who are victimized by bullying in an effort to intervene and minimize the detrimental psychological effects. The scale, coined the *Peer Victimization Scale*, was piloted for a sample of 60 female students between ages 10-12. It consists of 6 items woven into the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (Harter, 1985). This revealed an inverse relationship between increased victimization and lower scores on scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and global self-worth. Athletic



competence was the only domain unaffected by victimization. Additionally, higher scores of victimization were correlated with increased depression.

Further support for the interaction between victimization and self-worth was found in a study investigating the mediating and moderating role that self-worth plays between peer victimization and symptoms of anxiety (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). In a study with 6<sup>th</sup> grade students, global self-worth was found to play a mediating role between peer victimization and anxiety for girls, but not for boys (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). Girls tended to internalize peer victimization more than boys did, which resulted in declines in their global self-worth, and lower self-worth was then related to increased anxiety. The quantity of victimization was unrelated to increased anxiety for some boys; however, anxiety was related to a lower self-worth in some boys. Results indicate that self-worth plays a moderating role between victimization and anxiety for boys. Boys with high victimization scores and high global self-worth were resistant to anxiety and able to discount the teasing they endured and maintained a high self-worth. These findings support those found in prior research by LaGreca & Fetter (1995) which suggest that a high self-worth serves as a protective factor against anxiety when confronted by life stressors, which, in this case, was peer teasing.

Verkuyten and Thijs (2006) hypothesized that being treated unfairly based on race would negatively influence one's ethnic self-esteem which, in turn, would correlate with declines in self-worth. In an investigation with children of four ethnicities residing in The Netherlands, ranging from 10-13 years old, ethnic self-esteem had a mediating role between discrimination from peers and global self-worth (Verkuyten, & Thijs, 2006). These findings were consistent regardless of the form of victimization, whether it was

name calling and teasing or social exclusion; however, name calling and teasing had a stronger negative correlation to global self-worth than did social exclusion (Verkuyten, & Thijs, 2006). In another investigation examining the correlation between peer victimization in a sample of children with learning disabilities, results indicated that peer victimization was positively correlated with symptoms of anxiety, depression and attention problems. There also were reports of withdrawal, social problems, thought problems, and disruptive behaviors, based on parent rating scale results (Baumeister, Storch, & Geffken, 2008). Unfortunately, as this data are correlated, determining the influence victimization may have on these variables or how these variables increase one's likelihood of becoming victimized remains unknown.

The adverse social and psychological effects of bullying are well founded for Caucasian samples of children. Fewer studies have explored the relationship between victimization and adverse effects on social and psychological facets for minority children. However, research indicates that a positive relationship between overt victimization and social avoidance, loneliness, and depressive symptoms found with Caucasian samples hold true for African American and Hispanic children as well (Storch, Phil, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas, 2003). On the other hand, "relational victimization was found to be uniquely associated with depressive symptoms, fear of negative evaluation, and social avoidance of general situations for girls only" in the sample of African American and Hispanic children (Storch, Phil, Nock, Masia-Warner, & Barlas, 2003, p. 439). Overall, victimization seems to impact children's social and emotional functioning negatively, regardless of their ethnicity.

### Chapter Three: Hypotheses

#### Overall Research Question

This study has raised several questions pertaining to children's self-perceptions. First, how are children's self-perceptions related to their cognitive functioning and academic achievement? Second, does academic placement, such as receiving Gifted Support, Learning Support, or Regular Education impact children's self-perceptions? Third, to what extent are children's self-perceptions related to their perception of victimization by peers? Fourth, are children's academic placement related to their perceived victimization by peers? Fifth, are children's self-perceptions stable or do they vary across academic years?

The study assessed children in 12 fourth grade classrooms and 11 third grade classrooms in 4 elementary schools. Children's scores on the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC; Harter, 1985) were compared with their achievement scores on the *TerraNova*, *CAT* (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001) and *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment* (PSSA), and also compared with their Cognitive Skills Index (CSI) derived from the *InView* (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001) assessment. Children were administered the SPPC across 2 academic years to assess children's consistency versus variability in their self-perceptions over time. During the second administration, the *Peer Victimization Scale* (PVS; Neary & Joseph, 1994), which consists of 6 items to measure the extent that children believe themselves as bullied by peers, was interspersed among the items in the SPPC survey. Children's perception of victimization was compared with their self-perceptions. Academic placements for children receiving Learning Support, and Gifted

Support were compared against the students receiving Regular Education, based upon the children's self-perception and victimization scores.

### **Hypothesis 1: Self-Worth and Academic Achievement**

Ho: Children's self-perception of their scholastic competence and global self-worth will be unrelated to their academic achievement (*Terra Nova*, *CAT* and *PSSA* scores) and cognitive functioning (CSI scores).

H1: Children's self-perception of their scholastic competence and global self-worth will be positively correlated with their academic achievement (*Terra Nova*, *CAT* and *PSSA* scores) and cognitive functioning (CSI scores).

### **Rationale for Hypothesis 1**

Children's cognitive ability (CSI scores) is used as a predictor of academic performance (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001). Research has revealed a positive correlation between academic achievement and self-perceptions (Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978; Stringer & Heath, 2008). Additionally, Marsh (1987) found children's academic performances were strongly correlated with academic self-perceptions and modestly related to global self-perceptions. Thus, these findings support the notion that one's academic achievement and cognitive functioning will be positively related both to children's self-perceptions of scholastic competence and to global self-worth.

### **Hypothesis 2: Learning Support and Regular Education Students**

Ho: Children with learning disabilities receiving Learning Support will have self-perception scores comparable with children receiving Regular Education.

H1: Children with learning disabilities receiving Learning Support will reveal lower self-perception scores in the following domains: social acceptance, scholastic competence,

behavioral conduct, and global self-worth compared with children receiving Regular Education.

### **Rationale for Hypothesis 2**

According to social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), children evaluate their worth based on their performances compared with those around them. Persistent learning difficulties places these children at risk for developing an external locus of control, developing learned helplessness, fostering negative self-perceptions of their abilities, and lower academic achievement expectations (Chapman, 1988b). Children with learning disabilities perceptions remained stable across a two-year time span, indicating internalized attributions as a result of their prior academic hardships (Chapman, 1988b). These negative self-perceptions may place them at increased risk for negative internalizing behaviors and externalizing behaviors, leading to lower self-perceptions of their behavioral conduct. Additionally, Smith and Nagle (1995) found that children with learning disabilities reported lower perceived competence in academic ability, intelligence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct compared with non-LD peers. Worse yet, children with learning disabilities are more likely to experience peer victimization (Luciano, & Savage, 2007) and are less socially accepted (Wiener & Schneider, 2002), thus they are expected to reveal lower self-perceptions related to social acceptance as well.

### **Hypothesis 3: Gifted Support and Regular Education Students**

Ho: Students receiving Gifted Support will have self-perception scores comparable with students receiving Regular Education.

H1: Students receiving Gifted Support will have higher self-perceptions in regard to their scholastic competence and global self-worth compared with students receiving Regular Education.

### **Rationale for Hypothesis 3**

Although gifted children and high academically performing children have more robust self-perceptions compared with their average or below average academically performing peers (Tidwell, 1980a; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Coleman & Fults, 1982; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993), within group differences have been found for gifted children receiving pullout enrichment versus those that remain in the Regular Education classroom (Coleman & Fults, 1982). Supporting Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory, findings reveal that gifted children are likely to engage in upward social comparison and tend to compare themselves with other gifted children rather than with their normal achieving peers (Coleman & Fults, 1982). However, despite some declines in self-perception upon receiving gifted pull-out support, based on their persistent academic success, they will likely have higher self-perceptions for scholastic competence and global self-worth, compared with peers receiving Regular Education.

### **Hypothesis 4: Victimization and Self-Perceptions**

Ho: The extent to which children are victimized by peers, according to PVS scores, will be unrelated to children's self-perceptions.

H1: Increased victimization by peers, according to PVS scores, will reflect an inverse relationship to children's self-perceptions of academic competence, social acceptance and global self-worth.

#### **Rationale for Hypothesis 4**

Research has shown a negative relationship between being bullied and poor self-esteem (Spade, 2007). Moreover, children's academic performance and social acceptance have been found to be significantly related (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). Klima and Repetti (2008) found a one-way relationship between poorer peer acceptance contributing to increases in negative internalizing and externalizing behaviors and lower global self-worth. After investigating this relationship, future social acceptance was found to influence children's academic success indirectly by having a direct impact on their academic self-perceptions, which was a mediating variable to academic performance (Klima and Repetti, 2008).

In comparing children's responses on the *Peer Victimization Scale* and self-perceptions, Neary and Joseph (1994) found an inverse relationship between increased victimization and lower scores of self-perception on scholastic competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, behavioral conduct and global self-worth. Athletic competence was the only domain not related to perceived victimization by peers.

#### **Hypothesis 5: Victimization and Academic Placement**

Ho: No differences will be revealed between children's perception of victimization (PVS scores), regardless of their academic placement.

H1: Children in Learning Support will report more victimization, based on their PVS scores, than children in Gifted Support or Regular Education.

#### **Rationale for Hypothesis 5:**

Children with learning disabilities are especially vulnerable to bullying by their peers. In a study investigating the propensity of bullying between fifth grade students,

both with and without learning difficulties, the students with learning disabilities reported significantly more incidents of victimization by peers than did students without learning disabilities (Luciano, & Savage, 2007). Upon further exploration between the tendency for children to be victimized, more or less depending on inclusion or pull-out Learning Support, findings indicated that both groups of learning disabled students report comparable rates of bullying (Luciano, & Savage, 2007).

### **Hypothesis 6: Changes from Year 1 to Year 2**

Ho: Children's self-perceptions will vary from one academic year to the next.

H1: Children's self-perceptions will not vary from one academic year to the next.

### **Rationale for Hypothesis 6**

Children around age 8 begin to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in comparison with their peers (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). Through social comparisons, children become aware of their ranking among their peers. Children start to develop internalized beliefs about themselves around 8-years-of age (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebel, 1980). Thus, children's self-perceptions are expected to remain stable if internalized and therefore will not vary from one academic year to the next, regardless of being in different classes with different students with whom to compare themselves.



## Chapter 4: Method

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to compare children's scores on the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC; Harter, 1985) over two years and assess differences between children within a variety of subgroups and across several variables. The variables under investigation include: academic placements, being victimized by peers, academic achievement and cognitive skills. Also under investigation was the stability of children's self-perceptions across two academic years. Academic placement subgroups consisted of students receiving Gifted Support, Learning Support, or Regular Education. The students' academic achievement was compared with their *TerraNova*, *CAT* and *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)* scores, as well as with their cognitive abilities, as measured by the *InView* test. The SPPC was administered to third and fourth grade students attending one of the four elementary schools in the Marple Newtown School District. The SPPC, along with the Peer Victimization Scale (PVS; Neary & Joseph, 1994) was administered the following year to the same cohort of students when the students were in fourth and fifth grades. The PVS consists of 6 questions assessing the extent to which the child feels victimized by peers.

### Design and Design Justification

The present study utilized a longitudinal research, repeated measures design, which involved 461 students in third and fourth grades, attending one of the four elementary schools in the Marple Newtown School District. This study investigated the consistency between children scores on the SPPC over two years. Students were administered the SPPC in December 2008 (Time 1) and October 2009 (Time 2).

Children's self-perceptions were compared between the two assessment points. Gaining clarity into the consistency of children's self-perceptions has provided insight into the extent that children's self-perceptions remain stable or change over time.

Additionally, distinctions in children's self-perceptions was assessed relative to cognitive abilities scores, academic achievement score, victimization by peers, and the students' academic placements, such as Regular Education, Gifted Support, and Learning Support. Understanding how these factors correlated with children's self-perceptions will assist professionals in better identifying children with poor self-perceptions and in implementing interventions to promote healthier perceptions of self.

### **Participants**

Students attended one of the four elementary schools in the Marple Newtown School District, which is located in suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The school district comprises both Marple and Newtown Townships. The four elementary schools include families with diverse socioeconomic status. Families' financial standing sprawls across the continuum within these townships due to multiple apartment communities and newly developed luxury homes. Among the four schools, approximately 10 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch based on their family's financial needs. The majority of the families are middle-class.

Each elementary school has a full-time school counselor. Full-time elementary school counselors were implemented in September, 2004. Each counselor was trained in the American School Counselors Association National Model, which emphasizes being proactive and responsive to all students' needs. The school counselors developed and implemented a Developmental Guidance Curriculum with specific lessons designed to

improve students' awareness of feelings, empathy towards others, communication skills, problem-solving skills, goal setting, appreciation for diversity and individual differences, positive self-talk and cope techniques to deal with challenges, awareness of their learning styles, career exploration, non-verbal communication, and transition to middle school.

In addition to leading class lessons, the school counselors meet with students individually or in small groups to meet students' counseling needs. Topics discussed in counseling include study skills, social skills, anxiety, loss, and parental divorce or separation. The most common counseling groups are 'friendship groups'. During friendship groups, children play games and work on important social skills, such as taking turns taking, listening skills, manners, and initiating friendships.

Over the past few years, each elementary school launched an Olweus Bully Prevention Program. The program teaches students, teachers, and parents to identify bully behaviors and to learn how to respond when bullying occurs. Students learn what to do when they encounter a bully. Parents learn the importance of communicating bullying to school personnel. Teachers are taught to implement school-wide rules and the consequences for bullying and to address situations seriously as they arise.

In December of 2008, students from all four schools completed the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC). The schools were composed of 23 classes of third and fourth grades, consisting of 11 classes in third grade and 12 classes in fourth grade. Responses from students who were receiving Learning Support (n = 38, 75% boys), Gifted Support (n = 47, 55% boys), or who were in regulation education without any additional pull-out remedial reading support (n = 321, 43% boys) were used in the current study. A chi-square test was conducted to assess whether or not there was an

equal representation of boys and girls in each of the educational contexts. The results of the test were significant,  $\chi^2(2, N = 407) = 8.88, p = .012$ . This is likely due to an over-representation of boys in Learning Support (and, conversely, an under-representation of girls) and an under-representation of boys in Gifted Support (and, conversely, an over-representation of girls). Ninety-five percent of the sample was Caucasian, 3% Asian, and 2% were not identified as members of either of these ethnicities.

In October of 2009, students were re-administered the *Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC) in conjunction with the *Peer Victimization Scale* (PVS). At time 2, students were assessed from the 11 fourth grade and 12 fifth grade classes ( $N = 427$ ). Responses from students who were receiving Learning Support ( $n = 59$ ), Gifted Support ( $n = 44$ ), and regulation education ( $n = 324$ ) were used in the current study.

### **Inclusion and Exclusion**

This school population was selected in light of their recent implementation of the SPPC to students in third and fourth grades. All students in the third and fourth grades within the district were invited to participate in the survey. Students absent for the initial implementation of the survey met in a small group to complete the survey, which was administered by the school counselor. The same make-up procedures were utilized during Time 2 to prevent attrition due to absenteeism. Some student attrition is expected, based upon their transfers to other schools from one year to the next. Additionally, some new students are expected to transfer into the district, thus only one year of data (at Time 2) will be collected for all new students.

Data collected from the students in regulation education who receive Title 1, a pull-out remedial reading support program, were not utilized in this study.

**Screening Procedures Determining Inclusion Criteria**

All students in the four Marple Newtown Elementary Schools in third and fourth grades completed the SPPC survey unless parents requested that their child be exempt from the assessment. The elementary school counselors elected to pilot the survey for third and fourth grade students for two reasons. First, the survey is designed for students 8-years-old or older, thus excluding children younger than third grade. Second, children in fifth grade transition into the middle school for 6<sup>th</sup> grade, thus reassessing them the following academic year was not feasible. Therefore, assessing students in third and fourth grades enabled the counselors to maximize the applicability of the survey. The same inclusion criteria that was applied to the first administration of the SPPC was applied to the second administration of the SPPC and PVS.

In compliance with §4.51(b)(4) of the PA School Code the State Board of Education, all Pennsylvania students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 were assessed annually with the *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)* in reading and math. Additionally, all students in the Marple Newtown School District participated in the *Terra Nova*, *CAT* (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001) to measure academic achievement and *InView* (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001) assessment to measure cognitive functioning unless the child parents request their child not participate in the testing. Some children moved into the district after the second grade *Terra Nova*, *CAT* and *InView* testing was completed, thus some children included in the study will not be eligible for academic or cognitive ability comparisons against their self-perceptions.

### **Screening Procedures Determining Exclusion Criteria**

Children whose parents requested they not be administered the survey were excluded at the Time 1 and Time 2 administration of the SPPC and PVS. The same exclusion criteria applied to both administrations of the surveys. Some children were not eligible for comparisons between their self-perceptions from Time 1 to Time 2 due to attrition or to moving into the district following the Time 1 administration. Additionally, some children did not have academic achievement scores or cognitive ability scores for comparison if they were excluded from the second grade *Terra Nova*, *CAT* and *InView* testing. Additionally, data collected from the students in regulation education who receive 'Title 1', a pull-out remedial reading support program, were not utilized in this study. Moreover, parents could exempt their child from participating in surveys implemented by the district by making a request. Thus, two students did not participate in the SPPC and PVS questionnaires following their parents request that they be exempt.

### **Recruitment**

The Marple Newtown School District implemented the *TerraNova*, *CAT* and *InView* test as part of their district-wide assessments for all second grade students. All students participated in the district assessment for two weeks in December and students that were absent were administered make-up testing upon their return to school.

The Marple Newtown School District's Superintendent, Dr. Merle Horowitz, approved the implementation of the SPPC and the PVC as a step towards the districts' adoption of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model. RTI emerged from the revisions in 2004 to IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). In

accordance with the movement towards RTI, the district sought to implement a universal screening method for children in need of additional counseling services.

Based on the Superintendent's approval for the implementation of the SPPC and PVS and the School Board's approval for the district to administer the *TerraNova*, *CAT* and *InView* test as part of their district-wide assessments, almost all students participated in the assessments and no recruitment was necessary. However, two students were exempt from participating in the SPPC and PVS questionnaires following their parents' requests to exclude their children from participating.

#### **Plan for Informed Consent Procedures**

All Marple Newtown School District second grade students complete the *TerraNova*, *CAT* and *InView* test unless a written request from the student's parent was received, exempting their child from the testing. The Marple Newtown School Districts approved the implementation of the SPPC and PVC, thus informed consent was not solicited from the students or their parents based upon the district's endorsement of the survey. In accordance with Pennsylvania Department of Education state law, all students in third, fourth, and fifth grades completed the *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)*, thus parent permission was not sought.

A letter to third and fourth grade students' parents was written by the elementary counselors to inform parents about the new survey being administered. Parents were informed that their child's participation was optional and if they preferred their child to be exempt from the survey, they could notify their child's school counselor. Thus parents were informed of the plans for the surveys' implementation and provided appropriate time to excuse their child from participating if they so chose.

## Measures

*Self-Perception Profile for Children* (SPPC; Harter, 1985). The SPPC, developed by Susan Harter (1985) has been a valued assessment tool for several decades and has remained a popular means for assessing a child's feeling about him/herself. The survey contains 36 items and each item has a four-point scale. Children's self-perceptions are assessed in regard to one's feelings across 6 domains, including Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-worth. Each domain includes 6 items, thus total scores can range from 6 to 24; the mean for each domain ranges from 1 to 4. Mean scores ranging from 1 to 2 are noted as *low* scores; scores between 2 to 3 fall in the *medium* range, and scores that fall between 3 and 4 are noted as *high* scores. The SPPC has acceptable internal consistency, is a reliable measure of children's self-perceptions, and possesses normative and psychometric data for children between Grades 3 through 8. Each question is antithetical; this means that children are asked to select one of two statements as being more true to them and then to determine if the statement is 'really true' to them or 'sort of true' to them. The questions are structured in the following manner: (sample question below)

Really True for me	Sort of True for me				Sort of True for me	Really True for me
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Some kids find it <i>hard</i> to make friends . . .	BUT	Other kids find it's pretty <i>easy</i> to make friends.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

*Peer Victimization Scale* (PVS; Neary & Joseph, 1994). The PVS was designed to be integrated into the SPPC. The PVS consists of 6 items interspersed within the SPPC. Each item has a four-point scale. The question assess the extent to which the



child feels victimized by peers either by physical actions, such as being hit, pushed, or bullied, and by verbal actions, including being teased, laughed at, or ridiculed by peers. Items are scored in the same fashion as the SPPC and mean scores range from 1 to 4; high scores represent increased perceptions of victimization. The PVS has been utilized for children ranging from 8 to 12-years-old and has proven reliable in discriminating between those children who are and who are not victimized by peers. Construct validity between the PVS and interviews were consistent in the level of victimization described by children.

*TerraNova, California Achievement Test (CAT), Second Edition* (CTB/ McGraw-Hill, 2001). The *TerraNova, CAT, Second Edition* is a widely accepted and utilized measure which is a group administered, norm-referenced, performance level standardized achievement test. All children are provided with uniform directions and the same questions are administered. The test consists of multiple-choice questions which are machine scored by CTB/McGraw-Hill. Three academic domains are assessed, which include Reading, Language Arts, and Mathematics. The Median National Percentile (MDNP) is the score that divides the national distribution of scores in half. Scores fall in a standard distribution, in which 50 percent of the national population's scores fall between the range of 25 and 75.

*InView* (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2001). The *InView* is a group administered test which measures children's cognitive ability. Students are provided with uniform directions and the test consists of multiple-choice items. The items are machine scored by CTB/McGraw-Hill. The test consists of five subtests: Sequences, Analogies, Quantitative Reasoning, Verbal Reasoning-Words, and Verbal Reasoning Context.

These subtests are combined to yield The Cognitive Skills Index (CSI), which is an age-dependent, standardized score based on an individual's performance on the test. The CSI score indicates a child's overall cognitive ability relative to the cognitive ability of other children the same age. The CSI has a mean score of 100 and a standard deviation of 16.

*Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)*. Since the adoption of the PSSA in 1999, every student in Pennsylvania is assessed annually from grades 3 through 8 and grade 11 in both reading and math. The PSSA is a standards-based, criterion-referenced assessment. The PSSA is used to determine students' academic achievement based upon academic standards. The student scores, in compliance with §4.51(b)(4) of the PA School Code the State Board of Education, are categorized, based upon the specific criteria designated for *advanced*, *proficient*, *basic* and *below basic* levels of academic achievement.

### **Procedure**

All children attending one of the four elementary schools in the Marple Newtown School District completed the *TerraNova*, *CAT, Second Edition* and *InView* assessment in December of their second grade academic year. The testing took place over the course of two weeks. A third week was allotted for make-up testing to accommodate student absentees. All students in Pennsylvania complete the *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment* (PSSA) in the spring of each academic year from grades 3 through 8 and grade 11.

The students completed the SPPC in December, 2008. The survey was adopted by the district to assess students' needs for counseling. The same cohort of children

completed the SPPC with the PVS in October of 2009 to assess children's self-perception and perception of victimization by peers.

At Time 1 and Time 2 administration of the surveys, each class was administered the survey by their school counselors. The counselors adhered to the SPPC survey script and read the survey questions aloud to students as they completed the survey. The teachers, classroom aides and counselors circulated throughout the room to ensure children were completing each question and reread items as needed. Children were informed that their responses were private and would be known only to the counselor for the purposes of providing student support.

The data collected from the two administrations of the SPPC and the one administration of the PVS was scored exclusively by the school counselors and remained accessible to only the counselors. The surveys were compared between the two administrations. Correlations between students' SPPC scores were compared against their cognitive abilities (CSI scores), academic achievement (*TerraNova*, *CAT* and *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment*) scores, extent of victimization (PVS scores), and academic placement (Regular Education, Gifted Support, and Learning Support).

### **Analysis of Risk/Benefit Ratio**

**Potential Risk to Participants.** Students were exposed to minimal risk upon completing the SPPC and PVS, although some children may have experienced some discomfort, based on their level of self-reflection and beliefs about themselves or in reflecting upon past victimization. The questions may provoke self-explorations which may elicit either positive or negative thoughts or feelings. Another potential effect of the

survey was a feeling of fatigue because the administration can last approximately 30 minutes in duration.

**Potential Benefit to Participants.** Although some children may encounter some distress while completing the assessment, the potential benefits far exceed any adverse effects. The children's data collected from the SPPC and PVS were used as an assessment tool to identify students in need of counseling services based on having poor self-perceptions in 2 or more of the 6 domains on the SPPC, or on PVS scores falling between 1 and 2.

**Potential Benefit to Others.** Upon completion of this study, additional insight was gained regarding the consistency of children's self-perceptions and factors correlated with children's self-perceptions, such as their perceptions of peer victimization, gender, cognitive abilities, academic achievement, and academic placement. Understanding factors correlated with children's self-perceptions has assisted professionals in better identifying risk factors associated with poor self-perceptions. By identifying potential risk factors, teachers and counselors can intervene for children with negative self-perceptions in an effort to improve their feelings about themselves, and thereby improving their motivation and academic performance.

### **Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality**

The information provided from these surveys was for the counselor's use only, in order to assess the counseling needs of students. The children's data remained strictly confidential. Each child's data set was ascribed a confidential code to ensure the child's anonymity. Any information matching the child's name with his or her code or survey scores was kept in a locked file cabinet and/or in a password secured computer file.

## Chapter Five: Results

### Differences in Academic Achievement

Before evaluating the hypothesis, a series of analyses were conducted to confirm that students' academic placements were in concert with their performances on academic achievement (*Terra Nova*, *CAT*, *Second Edition* scores) and cognitive functioning (CSI scores) tests. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between type of educational placement and student performances on standardized tests of achievement. The independent variable, educational placement, included three levels: Learning Support, Regular Education, and Gifted Support. The dependent variables were the scores on four assessment scales (CSI scores derived from the *InView* and Reading, Language Arts, and Mathematics, which are subscales from the *TerraNova*, *CAT*, *Second Edition*). The MANOVA was significant, Wilk's Lambda = .497,  $F(8, 706) = 36.88$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .54$  (indicating a very large effect size). Follow-up univariate ANOVA's indicated that all achievement test scores were significantly different for students in Learning Support, Regular Education, or Gifted Support (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for Effects of Educational Placement on Testing Scores*

	Learning Support (n = 34)		Regular Education (n = 279)		Gifted Support (n = 46)		ANOVA
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (2,356)
Assessment							
CSI	89.32	(12.63)	104.58	(11.11)	123.63	(6.97)	103.36

READ	33.44	(26.71)	72.87	(18.60)	87.15	(9.83)	87.42
LANG	36.12	(25.25)	72.63	(19.72)	89.72	(7.94)	78.46
MATH	43.65	(20.71)	72.23	(19.59)	91.20	(9.01)	63.30

Post hoc analyses indicated that, in all instances, students in Gifted Support performed better than students in Regular Education, who, in turn, performed better than students in Learning Support.

### Hypothesis 1: Self-Worth and Academic Achievement

In order to test the relationship between children's self-perceptions of their scholastic competence and global self-worth and with their academic achievement (*Terra Nova*, CAT scores) and cognitive functioning (CSI scores) a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Correlations between Self-Perceived Competence and Academic Achievement and Cognitive Functioning*

Self-Perceptions	Cognitive Skills Index (CSI)	Terra Nova Reading	Language Arts	Mathematics
Scholastic Competence	.290**	.298**	.317**	.364**
Social Acceptance	.092	.163**	.102*	.226**
Athletic Competence	-.007	-.013	.051	.167**
Physical Appearance	.033	.130**	.159**	.145**
Behavioral Conduct	.105*	.152**	.150**	.128*
Global Self-Worth	.084	.121*	.156**	.159**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Results revealed a positive correlation between students' scholastic competence self-perception scores and CSI scores ( $r = .290$ ,  $p < .01$ ). A strong positive correlation was revealed between students' scholastic competence and three domains of academic achievement, including reading ( $r = .298$ ,  $p < .01$ ), language arts ( $r = .317$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and mathematics ( $r = .364$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Several other assessed domains revealed low statistically significant correlations; however, these correlations are likely the results of a large sample and do not portray a true relationship.

In order to test the relationship between children's self-perceptions of their scholastic competence and global self-worth and with their academic achievement scores on the *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment* a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was conducted. Results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Correlations between Self-Perceived Competence and PSSA Achievement*

	Reading Scale	Math Scale
Self-Perceptions		
Scholastic Competence	.321**	.346**
Social Acceptance	.140**	.136**
Athletic Competence	.020	.102*
Physical Appearance	.110*	.147**
Behavioral Conduct	.166**	.114*
Global Self-Worth	.001*	.111*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Results revealed a positive correlation between students' scholastic competence self-perception scores and PSSA reading achievement ( $r = .321$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and PSSA math achievement ( $r = .346$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Several other assessed domains revealed low statistically significant correlations; however, these correlations are likely the results of a large sample and do not portray a true relationship.

### **Hypotheses 2 and 3: Learning Support, Gifted Support, and Regular Education Students**

In order to test the relationship between the self-perceptions of students with learning disabilities receiving Learning Support, students in Gifted Support, and students in Regular Education, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between type of educational placement and students' self-perceived competence.

The independent variable, educational placement, included three levels: Learning Support, Regular Education, and Gifted Support. The dependent variables were the scores on the six subscales of the SPPS (Scholastic Competence, Athletic Competence, Social Acceptance, Physical Appearance, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-Worth). The MANOVA was significant, Wilk's Lambda = .863,  $F(12, 796) = 5.06$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .27$  (indicating a medium effect size). Follow up univariate ANOVA's indicated that all six domains of self-perceived competence were significantly different for students in Learning Support, Regular Education, or Gifted Support. The results are displayed in Table 4.



Table 4\*\*

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for Effects of Educational Placement on Self-Perceived Competence*

	Learning Support (n = 38)			Regular Education (n = 321)			Gifted Support (n = 47)		ANOVA
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i> (*, *)
Competency									
Scholastic Competence	2.78	(.49)	<	3.11	(.65)	<	3.50	(.48)	14.25
Athletic Competence	2.90	(.79)	=	3.13	(.74)	=	2.92	(.79)	3.07
Social Acceptance	2.71	(.69)	<	3.22	(.67)	=	3.19	(.81)	9.05
Physical Appearance	3.04	(.76)	<	3.42	(.66)	=	3.25	(.72)	6.04
Behavioral Conduct	3.01	(.63)	<	3.34	(.64)	=	3.44	(.58)	4.97
Global Self-Worth	3.18	(.62)	<	3.51	(.56)	=	3.47	(.62)	5.60

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Post hoc analyses indicated that, in all instances, students in Gifted Support believed themselves to be more scholastically competent than students in Regular Education, who, in turn, believed themselves to be more scholastically competent than students in Learning Support. Additionally, there were no differences in the level of perceived athletic competence between and among the three groups. For all of the remaining domains, including Global Self-Worth, students in Learning Support believed themselves to be less competent than students in Regulation Education. There were no differences

between students in Regular Education as compared with Gifted Support in any (except for Scholastic Competence) in any of the competency domains.

#### **Hypothesis 4 and 5: Victimization related to Self-Perceptions and Academic**

##### **Placement**

In order to determine the relationship between self-perceptions of victimization by peers with children's self-perceptions of academic competence, social acceptance and global self-worth a Person Product Moment Correlation was conducted. Because victimization ratings were collected only in the second wave of data collection, this correlation was conducted, comparing victimization ratings from the second year with the other self-perceived competencies from the second year. See results in Table 5.

Table 5\*\*

*Correlations Between Self-Perceived Competence and Perceived Victimization*

	Victimization
Self-Perceptions	
Scholastic Competence	-.376**
Social Acceptance	-.524**
Athletic Competence	-.270**
Physical Appearance	-.432**
Behavioral Conduct	-.288**
Global Self-Worth	-.492**

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

Results revealed a negative correlation between students' perceptions of victimization by peers and each domain measured on the SPPC: scholastic competence ( $r = -.376$ ,  $p < .01$ ), social acceptance ( $r = -.524$ ,  $p < .01$ ), athletic competence ( $r = -.270$ ,  $p < .01$ ), physical appearance ( $r = -.432$ ,  $p < .01$ ), behavioral conduct ( $r = -.288$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and global self-worth ( $r = -.492$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, the higher children's self-perceptions scores, the lower their victimization scores, whereas, those children with lower self-perception scores perceived themselves as more frequently victimized by peers.

Mean scores comparing students in Learning Support ( $n = 59$ ), Regular Education ( $n = 324$ ), and Gifted Support ( $n = 44$ ) indicated that children in Learning Support ( $M = 1.74$ ) believe themselves to be more frequently victimized than children in either Regular Education ( $M = 1.49$ ) and Gifted Support ( $M = 1.53$ ). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated comparing academic group and perception of victimization. The analysis was significant,  $F(2, 424) = 3.49$ ,  $p = .03$ .

### **Hypothesis 6: Changes from Year 1 to Year 2**

A series of repeat measures ANOVAS were conducted to determine if there were changes in children's self-perception scores from Time 1 to Time 2 (See Table 6).

Table 6\*\*

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for Effects of Educational Placement on Self-Perceived Competence*

	Time 1		Time 2		t-test	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Self-Perceptions						
Scholastic Competence	3.09	(.65)	3.16	(.63)	-2.576	.01

Athletic Competence	3.10	(.74)	3.09	(.72)	.075	n.s.
Social Acceptance	3.15	(.72)	3.26	(.67)	-3.338	.001
Physical Appearance	3.33	(.71)	3.33	(.68)	-.046	n.s.
Behavioral Conduct	3.29	(.64)	3.32	(.63)	-.643	n.s.
Global Self-Worth	3.46	(.59)	3.51	(.56)	-1.467	n.s.

---

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$

No statistical difference was revealed between Time 1 and Time 2 for the following assessed domain scores: the athletic competence, physical appearance, behavioral conduct, and global self-worth. A statistically significant difference was revealed between the scholastic competence domain scores at Time 1 ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) and Time 2 ( $M = 3.16$ ,  $SD = .63$ ), indicating an increase in scores across time for this domain ( $t = -2.576$ ,  $p = .01$ ). In addition, a significant difference was found between Time 1 ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) and Time 2 ( $M = 3.26$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) results for the social acceptance domain, which also indicates an increase in scores over time ( $t = -3.338$ ,  $p = .001$ ).

Additional analyses (two-factor repeated measures ANOVA) comparing Time 1 to Time 2 and educational placement revealed no difference between educational placements except for physical appearance. Students in the Regular Education and Gifted Support remained the same, whereas children in Learning Support increased significantly from Time 1 ( $M = 3.00$ ) to Time 2 ( $M = 3.37$ ) in their self-perceptions of physical appearance.

## Chapter Six: Discussion

### Summary of Findings

The present study sought to explore the extent to which children's self-perceptions of their scholastic competence and academic achievement (*Terra Nova*, *CAT* and *Pennsylvania System of School Assessment* scores) and cognitive functioning (CSI scores) were related. As expected, results revealed a positive correlation between students' scholastic competence scores and CSI scores and a strong positive correlation between students' scholastic competence and all three domains of academic achievement, including reading, language arts, and mathematics. Similar findings were revealed between students' scholastic competence scores and PSSA scores for reading and math. These findings are consistent with prior results (Marsh, 1987; Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978; Stringer & Heath, 2008). Unexpectedly, however, students' achievement scores and cognitive functioning scores were not significantly related to their global self-worth. Thus, these findings suggest that children's academic achievement and cognitive functioning does relate to their perceptions of their scholastic competence; however, it does not relate to their overall sense or worth.

In exploring group differences, significant differences were found between children's self-perceptions and the three academic groups, including Gifted Support, Learning Support, and Regular Education. Not surprisingly, children in Gifted Support perceived themselves as more scholastically competent than children in Regular Education. Children in Regular Education perceived themselves as more scholastically competent than children in Learning Support. In the domain of athletic competence, there were no differences between and among the three groups. Interestingly, for all of

the remaining domains, including global self-worth, children in Learning Support perceived themselves as less competent than children in Regular Education. This was true even for the non-academic domains of social acceptance, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. These types of differences were not evidenced for the children in Gifted Support. For these students, their self-perceived competence in all domains (except scholastic competence) did not differ from students in Regular Education. Thus, for the vast majority of assessed domains of competence, children in Learning Support perceived themselves as less competent than children in Regular Education; however, children in Gifted Support did not perceive themselves as any more competent or as any less competent than children in Regular Education.

Results were consistent with prior studies suggesting that children performing weaker academically and those with lower cognitive functioning are likely to have poorer self-perceptions compared with their higher functioning peers (Rubin, Cohen, Houston & Cockrel, 1996). Therefore, children in Learning Support portray more pervasive negative self-perceptions compared with their peers either in Gifted Support or in Regular Education placements, which was also consistent with Smith and Nagle's (1995) earlier findings. However, Smith and Nagle found that children with learning disabilities reported lower perceived competence in academic ability, intelligence, social acceptance, and behavioral conduct, compared with peers without learning disabilities; the present study also found lower self-perceptions for physical appearance in addition to the other domains.

Inversely, children in Gifted Support did not reveal more pervasive positive self-evaluations in the same way that Learning Support students revealed more pervasive

negative evaluations, compared with their peers in Regular Education. Although gifted children did reveal more robust academic self-perceptions, they did not reveal higher global self-worth than peers in other academic placements as has been indicated in prior studies (Tidwell, 1980a; Hoge & McSheffrey, 1991; Coleman & Fults, 1982; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993).

Children's perception of victimization by peers was compared with their self-perceptions. Interestingly, all assessed domains were significantly, negatively related to students' perceptions of victimization by peers. Further analysis revealed that students in Learning Support believe themselves to be more seriously victimized than children either in Regular Education or in Gifted Support placements. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that children struggling academically fall victim to negative feedback from their peers and are less socially accepted (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). Flook, Repetti, and Ullman, (2005) suggest that the feedback children receive from their peers may become internalized and thus increase their negative self-perceptions, thereby impeding their academic success.

Although this is a significant finding, none of the students in the three academic placements revealed high perceptions of victimization. Scores on the PVS were in the low range for all students. Low scores may be attributed to the district's implementation of bully prevention programs within each school several years ago.

Children's self-perceptions remained relatively consistent from one academic year to the next. Slight differences were revealed between children's scholastic competence and social acceptance across academic years. These changes may be a result of environmental changes, such as having a new teacher or peer group, or may be due to

internal changes, such as maturation, or the result of receiving in-school counseling. Overall, findings support the notion that children develop internalized beliefs about themselves by around 8-years-of age (Ruble, Boggiano, Feldman, & Loebl, 1980) and have a sense of their strengths and weaknesses in comparison with their peers (Ruble, Feldman, & Boggiano, 1976). Additionally, results were consistent with prior research findings in which learning disabled children's negative perceptions remained stable across a two-year time span; this suggests internalized attributions as a result of their prior academic hardships (Chapman, 1988b).

### **Implications**

Children's self-perceptions are an important factor impacting their motivation and academic success (Ames, 1978; Dweck, 1986; Bandura, 1982). Children suffering from negative self-perceptions may underestimate their academic potential (Coleman, 2004). Moreover, a positive self-concept has been correlated with increased academic success (Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989). Some research suggests that individuals with poor perceived competence will strive to minimize damage to their self-worth by withdrawing effort when they suspect failure or poorer performance, compared with their peers (Thompson & Perry, 2005). Similarly, other studies have found that children with learning disabilities put forth more effort and are more academically successful if they hold positive self-perceptions regarding their academic competence (Meltzer, Reddy, Pollica, Roditi, Sayer, & Theokas, 2004).

Given the impact that children's self-perceptions have on academic motivation and success, school personnel interested in maximizing children's academic success must promote positive self-evaluations for children in all academic placements. The most



axiomatic approach to enhancing children's self-esteem is by improving their academic skills, thus increasing their successes and accomplishments, warranting increases in their evaluations of self (Seligman, 1998). A meta-analysis comparing interventions aimed at enhancing the self-perceptions of children with learning disabilities found that the effectiveness varied, based on the age of the children (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001). Counseling interventions were found most effective for middle school and high school children in boosting their evaluations of self. However, the most effective means for increasing the self-perceptions of elementary, learning disabled children was improved academic skills (Elbaum & Vaughn, 2001).

The results from this study demonstrated the strong interconnectedness between children's academic performances and self-perceptions. Thus, schools are encouraged to evaluate children's self-perceptions regularly and intervening when children demonstrate negative evaluations of their competence. Appraisal and intervention for children with negative self-evaluations are an essential component to increase children's motivation and academic outcomes.

Based on the findings of this study, it is not surprising that children reveal higher academic achievement on standardized tests in schools with comprehensive school counseling programs, compared with schools without such programs (Sink & Stroh, 2003). Webb, Brigman, and Campbell (2005) supported these and other studies' findings, revealing improved student academic achievement and social functioning in schools with school counselors who implemented empirically-supported interventions. Frey (2005) investigated how children with learning disabilities are supported by their school counselors and found that school counselors were proactive and aware of the

unique needs of the students when following the American School Counselors Association National Model. School counselors implementing this model assisted children with learning disabilities to maximize their academic success by facilitating goal setting, ensuring students' inclusion, devising positive behavior support plans, providing skills training, such as social skills, anger management, and behavior management and coping skills, advocating for the students, psychoeducation, and consultation with teachers and parents (Frye, 2005). These counselors' activities proved to enhance learning disabled students' coping skills, self-esteem, behaviors, and enabled the students to feel more comfortable and less limited by their disabilities (Frye, 2005). In sum, comprehensive school counseling programs have proven to play an instrumental role in improving students' academic success both for children with learning disabilities and without learning disabilities.

Schools interested in promoting children's self-esteem can do so by implementing Harter's (1999) cognitive and social interventions. Harter (1999) recommends starting by enhancing children's perceived success and competence in areas they deem important, such as by modifying activities to the students' academic skill level to ensure success and reduce frustration. Alternatively, cognitive restructuring can be effective by changing the weight that a child places on different domains. By placing greater value on domains in which he/she is successful and reducing the value of areas in which he/she performs poorly, the child will have a more robust global self-worth. Moreover, helping children create accurate self-reflections and evaluations can promote more positive self-perceptions. Identifying children at risk for negative self-perceptions and implementing cognitive restructuring proactively may prevent low-self-esteem, especially in times of

transition when most children suffer slight declines in their views of themselves.

Additionally, efforts should focus on recognizing children's attribution styles and implementing cognitive restructuring to elicit more global, stable, and internal attributes for children's academic successes. By following these suggestions outlined by Harter (1999), children's perceptions of competence will likely improve.

The tendency for students in Learning Support to have more pervasive negative self-evaluation compared with children in Regular Education and Gifted Support may be directly related to the academic group to which the students belong. These results supported the earlier findings of Renick and Harter (1989), in which children with learning disabilities demonstrated poorer self-perceptions, compared with peers without learning disabilities, by choosing to compare themselves with their peers without learning disabilities. Thus, children with learning disabilities generally compare themselves with average peers regardless of the fact that in doing so they elicit more negative self-evaluations.

On the other hand, the reverse was found for gifted children. Coleman and Fults (1982) assert that gifted children experience declines in their self-evaluations following their placement in a weekly Gifted Support program, because they tend to compare themselves with other gifted children rather than with their average achieving peers. Moreover, Nesdale and Flessner (2001) found that children in the low-status group expressed a desire to change groups and did not identify themselves with other group members, but children in the high-status group felt similar to other high-status members. Thus, the discrepancy between children's self-perceptions may be inherent in the academic group to which they belong.

Although schools must adhere to the laws established by the US Department of Education and ensure that students are placed in the least restrictive environment, school personnel should take into consideration students' self-perceptions when making recommendations for the best academic placement. Although providing an educational placement to maximize the students' educational growth is paramount, assessing students' self-perceptions and implementing interventions when needed may prove instrumental in maximizing students' academic gains. This may prove especially true for students in Learning Support placements.

The results from the PVS indicated that children in Learning Support believe themselves to be more frequently victimized by peers. This may be the result of what children value in elementary school and how the children are perceived by their peers. If indeed, as suggested by the finding in the study, children in Learning Support are more likely to experience victimization due to their academic difficulty, they are likely at risk for developing internalized negative self-perceptions which may impede their academic success (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005). Thus, schools are advised not only to implement bully prevention programs for the benefit of all students, but also to monitor children in Learning Support closely for indications of victimization and intervene as needed.

### **Further Directions**

Although the findings from this study have resulted in unraveling several questions, further research is warranted to assess the generalizability of these findings. The results presented here pertain to children in a suburban school, with minimal racial diversity, and with few children qualifying for free or reduced lunch. To assess the

generalizability of these findings, future studies should assess the extent to which these findings are able to be replicated with more diverse populations, such as in those in urban settings, with more racially diverse populations, and with more children eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Moreover, every school the Marple Newtown School District has implemented a bully prevention program. Thus, schools without such programs may reveal higher scores for perceived victimization by peers. In addition, schools without bully prevention programs may reveal either greater or less discrepancy between student's perceptions of victimization in relation to the student's academic placement. Thus, further research is suggested in schools without bully prevention programs.

In 2004, the Marple Newtown School District implemented full-time school counselors trained in the American School Counselors Association National Model in each elementary school. Research has supported the notion that counselors following this model are proactive and aware of the unique needs of the students (Frey, 2005). Thus, schools without elementary school counselors or schools with counselors who adhere to a different model may reveal differing results than the findings presented here. Thus, further research is warranted in such schools to assess the generalizability of these findings.

The present study compared children in Learning Support, Gifted Support and Regular Education. Students enrolled in Title 1, a remedial reading program were excluded from the study to gain a clearer picture regarding the relationship between educational placement and children's self-perceptions. However, future studies should investigate the self-perceptions of students receiving remedial reading support.

**Limitations**

Several questions remain unanswered with regard to the findings of this research. Most pronounced is the deficit of correlation data. It remains unclear if the children's diagnosis either of learning disabled or of academically gifted attributes to their self-perceptions. The present study focuses on academic placement as the independent variable rather than as an educational diagnosis. However, the children's diagnoses may also serve as a variable impacting the discrepancy between children's self-perceptions within the three academic settings. Thus, causal relationships cannot be interpreted from the present study.

Another limitation is due to the homogeneity of the sample. Although this is a large sample, ninety-five percent of the population is Caucasian. Also, most of the students in this study do not qualify for free or reduced lunch plans and only an approximate ten percent of the population is eligible. Thus, caution is warranted in generalizing these findings to children of diverse races or lower financial status.

Another limitation is in regard to the survey selected to measure students' self-perceptions. The SPPC (Harter, 1985) was selected, based on the diverse academic populations being compared; however, Renick and Harter (1988) developed the Self-Perception Profile for Learning Disabled Students (SPP-LD) as a preferred method of exploring the perceptions of children with learning disabilities. The SPP-LD assesses nine domains of self-perception and explores different areas of academic competence, including: general intellectual ability, reading competence, spelling competence, writing competence, math competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct, as well as global self-worth (Renick and Harter,

1988). Although this survey provides a greater in-depth picture of children's perceptions of competence, the information is beyond the scope of what the present study sought to explore.

Despite the shortcomings of this study, there are several strengths. One advantage to this study is the use of a multi-dimensional measure of children's self-perceptions exploring 5 domains of competence and global self-worth, compared with prior research exploring a single dimension of worth or self-esteem. Another advantage is the large sample size. Few studies have explored such a large number of children's perceptions of competency. Additionally, children's self-perceptions were measured at two points in time to assess consistency in their perceptions of competence and worth across two years. Thus, this research has many strong points which outweigh the shortcomings.

### **Conclusions**

To summarize, much has been learned about children's self-perceptions and sense of worth in recent decades; however, findings have been inconsistent in the past. The present study sought to gain clarity regarding several variables related to children's self-perception and sense of worth. Results revealed a positive correlation between students' self-perceptions of scholastic competence, cognitive skills, and academic achievement in reading, language arts, and mathematics.

Findings also suggest that the children's self-perceptions were significantly different, depending upon their academic group. Children in Learning Support demonstrated more pervasive negative self-perceptions, whereas the opposite effect was not evident for children in the gifted program.

A significant negative relationship was revealed between all assessed domains of self-perception and perceived victimization by peers. Moreover, children in Learning Support perceive themselves to be more frequently victimized by their peers than did children in either Regular Education or Gifted Support.

Understanding how these variables relate to children's perceptions of self and evaluation of worth provides school personnel with pertinent information to better identify children at increased risk for lower self-perceptions. Moreover, school personnel should consider children's self-perceptions when developing academic programming and implementing interventions. By striving to improve children's self-perceptions, schools will increase children's academic performance and thereby better enable them to achieve their academic success.



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